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It's not always easy eating green

• Seinfeld's 'sneaky' ways not condoned by health expert

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Article Last Updated: 11/12/2007 06:07:07 AM PST



HMMMMMMMM . . . Sheridan Todd, 6, stares down a plate of vegetables. Jessica Seinfeld's cookbook...

Apparently, all's fair in love, war and getting your kid to eat his veggies.

At least, that's the premise behind Jessica Seinfeld's new family cookbook, "Deceptively Delicious," which promises to seduce young veggie haters by hiding spinach in their cupcakes.

It's a controversial strategy, but appearances by its celebrity author -- who is married to comedian Jerry Seinfeld -- on "Oprah" and the morning shows, and feisty showdowns in the blogosphere have propelled the book to the top of the best-seller lists.

According to Seinfeld, the book has spurred a sea change in how parents feed their children. Her blog recounts her delight at the flood of e-mails from people "who bought the book and instantly changed their families' eating habits at home. Do you know how gratifying it is to be thanked by a mother for the fact that her child just ate spinach for the first time? And loved it?"

But if that mother was following Seinfeld's recipes, then that spinach was likely buried in brownie batter or blueberry cheesecake cupcakes -- not tossed with a nice vinaigrette, sauteed with garlic or served up in any conventional manner. And that's what concerns UC Berkeley's Patricia Crawford, a child obesity expert and principal investigator on a National Health Institutes study growth and health.

"I've been just fretting about this," Crawford says. "'Let's just hide (the vegetables) and see if they like it when they're 6 or 8 or 10'? I don't think so."

The book's advice runs counter, says Crawford, to everything nutritionists believe about building healthful eating habits. Early childhood is when kids are most receptive to new flavors. It's unrealistic to expect them to suddenly acquire a taste for actual vegetables when everything's been hidden during their formative years.

"That's the time to integrate them into the family meal," Crawford says. "Don't serve them baby food. Blend up what it is you make. If you love grilled zucchini, blend up your zucchini and make sure your baby likes what you like."

Spinach-infused brownies or casseroles enriched with a surreptitious half-cup of mashed chickpeas don't pack much of a nutritional wallop anyway, says Crawford. By the time a casserole has been divided into eight servings -- not that a young child eats an eighth of a casserole anyway, Crawford points out -- you're talking a tablespoon of added nutrients.

Run the recipes through a nutritional value calculator and the results are less than impressive. The additional nutrients in one Seinfeld recipe added the equivalent of 0.1 grams of protein, 1 percent of the daily recommended dosage of vitamin A and 2 percent of vitamin C per serving. And her hot cocoa recipe, which replaces some of the skim milk with sweet potato puree, sacrifices calcium for Vitamin C.

Seinfeld argues that she offers her children conventional vegetable dishes too, but that these methods sneak in a little extra. Crawford doesn't buy it.

But philosophy is one thing. Getting broccoli down Junior's gullet is quite another. And for some families, the nutritional ends justify the means.

"Yes, I have lied," says Walnut Creek mom Karen Kopiko-Upshaw. "When it comes to food that I really want them to try, I will try anything."

Kopiko-Upshaw tells her children that Dora the Explorer loves string beans.

Concord mom Catherine Schaefer renames foods that her kids would normally refuse -- veggie lasagna is rechristened "pizza lasagna."

Albany mom Peg Healy simply chops vegetables and adds them to curries, casseroles and stir-fries, whether the recipe calls for them or not.

But outright deception?

"It's almost impossible to sneak anything past my kids," says Allen Mueller, a Castro Valley dad. "The littlest speck of seasoning or anything which is not within the cheese or carb genre alerts their suspicions. I cannot remember anything that we have tried to serve them that has made it under their radar screens."

Ban before-supper snacking, says Crawford, "then you just happen to put those things with vegetables on the table first. Don't put it on after the macaroni."

Don't force a child to taste a food, or encourage him too much, but offer vegetables with every meal, says Crawford. Model the behavior of a veggie-lover -- let the kids see you love those colorful foods. And a little psychology goes a long way. Tempt them, but not with spinach brownies.

VEGGIE TACTICS

"I don't really hide vegetables. I just give Sophie the ones I know she likes and keep trying with new ones. I try to add them to as much as possible or give them to her in new ways: veggies in soups, frozen -- she loves ice, so frozen carrots and peas give her that fix -- and Whole Foods sells like cake-type foods that are made of veggies."

-- Jennifer Beck, Oakland

"Some veggies the kids would try once, but never eat again. Some veggies the kids liked immediately and continue to enjoy -- asparagus, peas, corn, etc. For us, threats and bribes worked best. 'No dessert unless you finish everything on your plate.'"

-- Greg Chabolla, Alamo

"I usually serve one or two vegetables plus a salad with dinner so it's always around. I've given older kids cut-up fruits and vegetables in the afternoon or evening as a snack -- a plateful on the table when they're watching TV will usually disappear. Veggies with dip go even faster. ... My favorite place to camouflage vegetables is in a main course, so I add steamed peas, beans, carrots, peppers, whatever to a casserole like tuna and noodles. Or put them with meat or tofu in a curry, or a sweet and sour sauce. It's almost as much for color as for nutrition."

-- Peg Healy, Albany

"I've used whatever cartoon character my daughter favors at the time. For example, I'll say, 'These string beans are one of Dora the Explorer's favorite things to eat.' I slip in different foods and cartoon characters -- it's worth at least a bite or two. Lately, I use this trick I got from one of those 'Chicken Soup' books. I'll say 'Oh, I made a special dish for Daddy. It's his favorite. I didn't make a lot so we have to save it for Daddy.' This will spark her interest and she'll ask if she could have a little. I'll pretend to think really hard about the decision and say, 'Well, maybe a little bit.' This worked last time with a vegetable stir-fry dish and she made me promise to 'make lots the next time so there would be lots for everyone.' I did and she ate very well that night."

-- Karen Kopiko-Upshaw, Walnut Creek

"Fortunately for me, both of my children like veggies with only a few exceptions. The only thing we did was to get spinach pasta, because my son doesn't really like pasta sauce. So at least he is getting something besides carbs."

-- Karen Cardinal, Martinez

Hot Cocoa Nutrition comparison

So what happens when you compare a vegetable-infused hot cocoa recipe from Jessica Seinfeld's "Deceptively Delicious" with a more traditional version? We ran the two recipes through an online nutritional content calculator.

Hot Cocoa with 1 1/4 cups Skim Milk and 1/2 cup Sweet Potato Puree

Traditional Hot Cocoa with 1 3/4 cups Skim Milk

Calories

205

182

Fat

0.6 g

0.6 g

Cholesterol

3 mg

4 mg

Sodium

244 mg

268 mg

Sugar

27.3 g

30.3 g

Protein

6.6 g

8.0 g

Vitamin A

7 percent

9 percent

Vitamin C

11 percent

0 percent

Calcium

15 percent

20 percent

Iron

10 percent

11 percent