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Local Agencies Team Up For Free Healthy Living Lessons

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Staff Writer

Eat better to live better.

That is the message Bethesda Health Clinic and the local Texas Agrilife Extension Service is sending to East Texas residents. They have partnered for a pilot program that brings in citizens for a free six-week lesson on shopping strategies, planning a healthy diet, stretching their food dollar, understanding food labels, controlling portions and learning how to whip up healthy meals.

The classes, offered each Tuesday and Friday, are possible because of a grant provided to Bethesda through the American Medical Association Foundation's Healthy Communities/Healthy America grant. Bethesda was awarded \$10,000 to support a local health living initiative, which includes the goal of thwarting obesity and controlling diabetes.

Bethesda used the funds to add a kitchen and a demonstration table for a hands-on cooking and healthy eating program.

The program at Bethesda is one of only seven free or low-cost clinics to receive the grant. The nonprofit, volunteer-based program is open to the public.

The program's instructor, registered dietician Neily Wheeler, uses the platform to show people how they can eat healthy on a budget.

"Some people are surprised that you can buy healthy foods for the same price you can buy bad foods," Ms. Wheeler said.

Ms. Wheeler said Americans are guilty of consuming empty calories or mindless eating out of habit. For example, she said all drinks at McDonald's were once served in today's "kiddie" sized cups. Now the large cups pump patrons full of sugar and calories.

"It's just wasted calories," she said. "People think it's a good deal, but it ends up being wasted on you or in the trash. Eighty percent of it is habit, and the other 20 percent is just the ease of today's society. It's easy to eat out and go to fast-food places."

Ms. Wheeler also said the platters that are served at restaurants offer too much food for one person. She said you may fill up before your brain even notices the stomach is full, but with a simple visual trick, you can eat less.

"One of the tricks is to fill it in smaller bowls and plates. You are going to feel like you are eating more when you're really not."

## **COOKING IT UP**

On Friday's menu is a southwestern bean burrito and salad. As Ms. Wheeler instructs the class, Cassandra Coleman, family and consumer science agent at Texas Agrilife Extension Service, cooks up the meatless burritos in the clinic's new kitchen, with the help of volunteer Juana Isabel Robles. Ms. Robles will soon teach a Spanish-speaking version of the class.

"This has been really fun," Ms. Coleman said, noting how diverse the recipes are. "We get in a cycle where we buy the same thing and eat the same foods."

At the beginning of class, participants get weighed and their vital signs are taken. Ms. Wheeler interacts with the class through guessing games and quizzes, and they receive prizes such as measuring cups and portioned containers for their participation. Friday's lesson is on serving sizes and how to control eating portions.

The first demonstration is how to make Greek yogurt, a much healthier alternative to sour cream or mayonnaise. Ms. Wheeler then tests the class's knowledge of serving sizes of cereal, popcorn, pasta, cheese and grapes. Almost everybody fares well in their guesses, but most are surprised on how little grapes you are supposed to eat in one sitting. Only one-half cup, or about 16 grapes, Ms. Wheeler tells the class.

Ms. Wheeler explains the difference between complex and simple carbohydrates and encourages participants to eat more fruits and vegetables, to take advantage of the antioxidants and nutrients the body needs. She also recommends that participants eat three meals and two snacks each day.

"If you're still hungry, go for seconds on the vegetables, not the starch," she said.

And for a quick guide to reading labels, she added, "Forty calories per serving is low. One-hundred calories per serving is moderate, and 400 calories per serving is high."

## **IMPACTFUL**

Last April, Ronda Paura was 281 pounds and coping with hypertension. A patient at Bethesda, she was introduced to the FitSTEPS for Life program, where area doctors and organizations join to promote a healthier lifestyle through physical activity. She's also been at each healthy living session at Bethesda since it began in mid-February. As of Friday morning, she said she's 59 pounds lighter.

So what was her motivation to make a change?

"I'm seeing the results," she said. "Seeing my blood pressure go to normal, and going from two pills a day to one pill a day. I also have people that'll say, 'You look good today.'"

Mrs. Paura said the class taught her to make better choices and she now controls her portions. Displaying how she used to eat, she showed off her 1 1/2 quart bowl that she used to eat cereal from and then her 3/4 quart bowl, which is just as satisfying.

"It took a while," she said about the adjustment. "It's a lot visual. You have to really change your mindset. Instead of living to eat, I'm eating to live. There's a difference."

She said her attitude change meant erasing life-long connections with food passed down from family.

"I came from a family where if you were a good kid, you got a candy bar or chocolate cake. That's how they expressed (being pleased with) you being a good kid."

To stay on course, the health benefits are enough incentive for her, she said.

"You just have to make a choice in what you are going to put in your mouth. It's just choices," she said.

Many of the participants have either had health problems or just want to learn to live better. Most are middle aged and older, which is not particularly a good sign, Ms. Wheeler pointed out.

"We have mostly older adults. Most already have diabetes or some other chronic illness. If we can get younger people in here before they develop these diseases, that would be even better," she said.

To find out more about the program contact Neily Wheeler at 903-596-8353 extension 120. or Cassandra Coleman at 903-590-2980. All classes are held at Bethesda Health Clinic, 409 W. Ferguson St.

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