

impact

University of Idaho Extension programs that are making a difference in Idaho.

Healthy Meals for Busy Families reduces spending at the drive thru

AT A GLANCE

The Healthy Meals for Busy Families program has found that families are cooking more at home and spending less on food dollars because of attending the program.

The Situation

Research shows that home-cooked meals are more likely to contain fruits, vegetables and whole grains without increasing food expenditures compared to eating out. Yet, the practice of cooking at home is declining with key barriers including lack of time, cooking skills and nutrition knowledge. Families may rather choose to go through a fast-food restaurant drive through or purchase convenience foods from grocery stores, resulting in poor diet quality and negative health outcomes.

Our Response

Healthy Meals for Busy Families program was developed by three family and consumer sciences Extension educators and is designed to instruct families on time-saving and simple ways to plan and prepare healthy and affordable meals at home through an interactive and hands-on approach. The objectives of the program are to a) increase knowledge and confidence in food preparation, b) expand knowledge and skills on meal planning, c) improve safe food handling practices, and d) increase knowledge of operating kitchen appliances safely after participating in the program. The primary target audience is adult residents in south-central Idaho.



Siew Guan Lee teaching healthy air fryer meals at an assisted living facility.

The program was delivered in person in University of Idaho Extension offices and senior centers in Cassia, Jerome, Minidoka and Twin Falls counties. The program runs two and half hours in length with participants divided into rotating stations to learn different lessons. Lesson topics included prep ahead freezer meals, healthy slow cooker recipes, quick electric pressure cooker meals, meal planning and nutrition, quick and easy meals, healthy air fryer meals and sheet pan meals. The program content was presented through demonstrations, hands-on meal preparation, recipe tasting, discussions, Extension publications and handouts. Each instructor presented the program content associated with the lesson topic at each station.

Program Outcomes

The evaluation process consisted of a retrospective pre- and post-survey administered after the program and has been approved by the University of Idaho Institutional Review Board. In 2023, 82 participants went through the Healthy Meals for Busy Families program including 74 females and seven males. Of them 71% are seniors aged more than 60. Significant improvements in knowledge, confidence and perceived skills among participants were shown through the evaluation process.

According to the participants self-assessment:

- 77% of participants reported the program was “Very to Extremely Useful” for meal planning.
- 87% reported “moderately to highly improved” pre-meal preparations.
- 74% planned to cook three to five times or more per week at home.

UI Extension continues to be a significant source of nutrition and healthy meal planning information. A follow up survey was conducted six months after the 2022 classes. As a result of taking the Health Meals for Busy Families class the participants self-assessments showed:

- 54% of respondents improved their cooking skills.
- 69% are cooking more than five times a week at home.
- 39% are saving \$10/week.

Home cooking has the potential to help consumers reduce spending on eating out. The average person spends approximately \$166 per month on eating out. By reducing the number of times, the average person eats out from three to one households can potentially see savings of \$1,327.68 per person each year (<https://www.statista.com/statistics/237215/average-away-from-home-food-expenditures-of-united-states-households/>).

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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