



## **UPDATED COMFORT FOODS KEEP THEIR COZY QUALITIES**

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Comfort Foods, we all have them....those “feel good” foods considered soothing and nurturing that are usually high in fat and calories. According to a survey commissioned by American Institute for Cancer Research (AICR), Americans have made unhealthy changes in the way they eat since the Fall of 2001. The survey shows that over 57 million Americans are eating more comfort foods like mashed potatoes and gravy, fried chicken, and macaroni and cheese. About 37 million are eating more hearty, rich foods like steak, stews and lasagna, and almost 55 million are eating more sugary foods like desserts and ice cream.

There has been a renewed interest in comfort foods. They are frequently craved in times of unhappiness or illness. They are the foods we used to eat on special holidays, at grandmother’s house, or what mom served when we were sick. The nostalgic feelings take us back to a comforting past, when life was easier and others made the hard decisions affecting our lives.

The most popular comfort foods include macaroni and cheese, beef stew, chicken soup, chili, meatloaf, mashed potatoes, chocolate chip cookies and rice pudding. Age, regional origin and ethnic background all have a bearing on which dishes people consider comfort foods. In addition to the happy memories they evoke, it is the textures and “mouth feel” that make comfort foods so appealing. But these qualities are often less than healthful.

“Unfortunately,” says Melanie Polk, AICR’s Director of Nutrition Education, “most comfort foods are high in calories and fat but low in the nutrients and protective phytochemicals we need to reduce our risk of chronic diseases, like cancer, and keep a healthy weight. Many of

these foods come from a time when the relationship between diet and disease was not well known, but now we know these foods are not good nutritional choices. Fortunately, with a few simple techniques, we can make most comfort foods as healthy as they are enticing.”

### **Simple Techniques Make Foods Health-Friendly But Still Comforting**

There are four techniques for preparing healthier comfort foods. One simple technique is substitution. For example, substitute an ingredient low in fat for a high-fat ingredient. Examples include evaporated skim milk in place of cream or olive oil instead of butter in many recipes.

Another technique to adjust comfort foods for health entails adding healthful ingredients such as vegetables, fruits, whole grains and beans. For example, add diced bell pepper and zucchini to your spaghetti sauce or a variety of beans to your chili recipe. Also consider proportionality of foods on your plate. The recommended proportion is two-thirds (or more) vegetables, fruits, whole grains and beans to one-third (or less) animal protein. For most Americans, that involves increasing the plant foods included on the plate and reducing the proportion of meat.

The third technique involves portion size. The AICR encourages consumers to spend a few minutes reading the Nutrition Facts label and using a measuring cup to regain a perspective on portion sizes. Relatedly, some comfort foods, like macaroni and cheese or stew, are often served as meals in themselves. By serving smaller portions of these foods and adding a few healthier foods, like cooked vegetables and a salad, you will achieve a more healthful meal, and still enjoy it.

For other dishes, like cheeseburgers and french fries, that are impossible to modify and still maintain the same flavor and texture, it is recommended that they be eaten in moderation.

Recognize your comfort foods for what they are and enjoy them in moderation. If your weight begins to creep up, take the initiative. *Shape Your Future...Your Weigh!*™ can provide additional practical strategies to prevent weight gain

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