

Cold Weather Comfort

By: Lois Ahrens

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Blustery winds, subzero temperatures, ice and snow-- the familiar realities of Iowa winters are enough to cause a need for comfort – specifically, for some, comfort foods.

“For many Americans, comfort foods trigger memories of childhood and bring us back to a time when someone took care of us,” said Brian Wansink, the John S. Dyson Professor of Marketing, Applied Economics, and Management at Cornell University. “Comfort foods connote a sense of security and warmth that Americans seem to embrace throughout their lives.”

The food chosen to eat for comfort may be determined not only by taste but by gender and age. A study by Cornell’s Food and Brand Lab showed most men prefer hot, hearty meals over snacks, gravitating towards pizza, soups, and pasta. Women, on the other hand, tend to prefer comfort foods that are sweet, choosing ice cream, chocolate and cookies. This same study indicated those 18 to 34 years old preferred snack-related flavor-saturated foods like chips and ice cream while those 35 years and older chose meal-related foods such as casseroles, soups, and side dishes.

Although comfort foods are often portrayed as “junk foods” with poor nutritional quality, some favorite foods of our past do provide beneficial nutrients. A few minor substitutions can enhance that nutritional quality. Consider these options:

- Potatoes such as Yukon Gold provide a nice buttery flavor for mashed potatoes. Leaving partial or all skins on for mashing not only saves time, it increases nutrients and fiber.
- Using 1% or skim low fat milk in preparing macaroni and cheese and other creamy pasta dishes leaves in flavor and nutrients while taking out fat.
- Whole grains are easily incorporated into many traditional favorites such as pasta, chips, and pizza. Consider choosing part or all whole grain pasta, whole grain crackers and corn or tortilla chips. Using a whole grain pizza crust with added veggies can be a quick, easy way to boost your daily nutrient intake.
- Soups give us that warm feeling while offering a great opportunity to include your favorite vegetables. Using evaporated skim milk in cream soups will avoid the extra fat yet yield a rich creamy texture.
- For that “sweet” fix, consider a small piece of extra dark chocolate, whole grain cookies like oatmeal raisin or adding your favorite frozen or fresh fruits to light ice cream.

We should be comfortable with food, especially as it comforts us. So, as those winter challenges wear on, go ahead and be comforted by good food. For the foods we offer our families today may influence the food choices our children make in the future.

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