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News Release

Preserving Food for Special Diets

Preserving foods to meet special dietary needs can be done easily in the home. The cost of commercially prepared food suitable for those on special diets is costly because the quantity handled is small and production procedures are slightly different than conventionally canned foods. Preserving food at home can be a practical way to save money if fresh produce and the necessary equipment are available.

Reduced-Salt Diets

Canning

Salt can be safely omitted from home canned vegetables, meats, poultry, and fish. Salt is used as a flavor enhancer rather than a preservative in canning if the recipe calls for only 1-3 teaspoons per pint or quart of food. Use the same process times as for conventionally canned foods (vegetables, meats, poultry, fish). If using a salt substitute, add it when serving the product; an unpleasant aftertaste can develop from the canning process if salt is added before canning.

Pickling

Salt concentrations should not be changed in pickle recipes. Reduced-sodium salts such as "Lite Salt" may be used in quick process pickle recipes. However, the pickles may have a slightly different taste than expected. *Never alter salt concentrations or use reduced-sodium salt when making fermented pickles or sauerkraut. Proper fermentation depends on correct proportions of salt and other ingredients.*

Reduced-Sodium Sliced Sweet Pickles

Brining solution

4 pounds (3- to 4-inch) pickling cucumbers
1 quart distilled white vinegar (5 percent)
1 Tablespoon canning or pickling salt
1 Tablespoon mustard seed
1/2 cup sugar

Canning Solution

1 2/3 cups distilled white vinegar (5 percent)
3 cups sugar
1 Tablespoon whole allspice
2 1/4 teaspoon celery seed

Yields 4 to 5 pints

Wash cucumbers and cut 1/16 inch off blossom end and discard. Cut cucumbers into 1/4 inch slices. Combine all ingredients for canning syrup in a saucepan and bring to a boil. Keep syrup hot until used. In a large kettle, mix the ingredients for brining solution. Add the cut cucumbers, cover, and simmer until cucumbers change color from bright to dull green (about 5 to 7 minutes). Drain the cucumber slices. Fill pint jars, and cover with hot canning syrup; remove air bubbles, leaving 1/2-inch headspace. Adjust lids and process pint jars for 10 minutes in a boiling water bath canner (at altitudes of 1,001-6,000 feet, increase process time to 15 minutes).

Freezing vegetables requires no added salt during preparation making them an excellent choice for reduced sodium diets.

Reduced-Sugar Diets (for a Diabetic Diet)

Granulated table sugar (sucrose) is the most frequently used sweetener in canning and freezing. Sugar helps preserve the color, texture, and flavor of the food, but is optional. The sugar in jams and jellies helps the gel to form, increases the flavor, and acts as a preservative. Honey, corn syrup, and brown sugar can be used as substitutes for granulated sugar; however these alternatives do not reduce calories and cannot be used for a diabetic diet. Please call the St. Clair County Extension office to request a brochure on making jams and jellies with artificial sweeteners at (205) 338-9416.

Canning

Fruit can be safely canned without sugar for the diabetic or reduced-calorie diet. Sugar is generally added to canned fruit to improve flavor, help stabilize color, and retain the shape of the fruit. Sugar does not act as a preservative in canned fruit. Fruit canned without sugar will be softer than a similar product packed in syrup. Flavor changes and loss of color may also be expected. The fruit still contains natural sugars, which must be considered in the diabetic diet. To can fruit without added sugar, try some of the following options:

- Crush or slice some of the fruit and can it in its own juice.
- Extract juice from other fruit, preferably from a mild-flavored fruit.
- Use water as the packing liquid.

Artificial sweeteners such as saccharine or aspartame should be added just before serving. Bitterness and off-flavors develop when saccharine is used in canning.

Freezing

Fruits can be frozen without added sugar because it is not a preservative. It does, however, help maintain flavor, color, and texture. Plan to use frozen fruit within one year for best quality. Serve fruit before it is completely thawed. This is especially important for fruit frozen without sugar. Sugar substitutes may be used in place of sugar. Labels on the products give the equivalents to a standard amount of sugar. Follow the directions to determine the amount of sweetener needed. Artificial sweeteners give a sweet flavor but do not furnish beneficial effects of sugar, such as thickness of syrup and color protection.

Sulfite-Free Diets

Sulfuring fruits prevents light fruits from darkening and helps retain the nutritive values during drying and storage. Sulfuring fruits before drying is fairly common in commercially dried, light-colored fruits. Sulfuring can be done at home using a sulfur solution or by exposing fruit to fumes from burning sulfur. Sulfur solutions are now banned as a preservative for fresh produce sold in supermarkets or at salad bars in restaurants. Drying fruits at home allows you to eliminate the use of sulfuring agents. Use an alternate method to prevent darkening of fruits, such as blanching in steam or syrup, or dipping in an ascorbic acid solution. Sulfuring agents are not used in canning or freezing processes.

For more information on food preservation, please contact Regional Extension Agent Angela Treadaway at the St. Clair County Extension office at (205) 338-9416 or email treadas@aces.edu. Our next Food Preservation class on will be held on Tuesday, June 30th in Pell City. There are a few openings left for this class, if you would like to participate. Just call the Extension office to pre-register or download a registration form at www.aces.edu/StClair.