

Nutrition: Making the Healthy Choice the Easy Choice

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SPEAKERS

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Ricky Telg 00:04

This is Science by the Slice, a podcast from the University of Florida's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences Center for Public Issues Education. In this podcast, experts discuss the science of issues affecting our daily lives, reveal the motivations behind the decisions people make, and ultimately provide insight to solutions for our lives.



Michaela Kandzer 00:43

Hi, listeners! This is Michaela Kandzer, Communications Specialist at the PIE Center. I want to welcome you to our series focused on nutrition. In this series, we will hear from two registered dietitians as they share with us the role that food plays in our bodies, in our communities, and ultimately in our lives. To kick off this series, we will hear from Dr. Karla Shelnutt, Associate Professor in the Department of Family, Youth and Community Sciences at the University of Florida, and Extension Nutrition Specialist. In this episode, Dr. Shelnutt is going to share with us how she uses her role at the University of Florida and the land-grant model to research, educate, and communicate with communities to help reduce food insecurity and to maximize overall nutrition. Keep listening. So can you start by explaining the role of food to individuals and communities? So, I know that kind of sounds like a simple question, but, kind of, what role does food play in communities?



Karla Shelnutt 01:40

Sure, you know, people think of food, a lot of people think it's just what I'm having for lunch or dinner today. But food in general does so much more than that, right? It really brings communities together. It builds relationships, right? If you think about the last time you got together with friends, you were likely around the dinner table, or maybe you went out to lunch or something. So food tends to be central to communication and relationships and really forms bonds with families and friends and increases happiness, really.

M

Michaela Kandzer 02:12

How did you become interested in studying nutrition and learning more about nutrition?

K

Karla Shelnuttt 02:16

I have an aunt who's a registered dietitian. So when I went to college, I had seen what she did and was very interested, so I went in the direction of dietetics. And once I started getting into the classes, especially all of the biochemistry and the physiology and just, kind of, learning about the basics of nutrition, that got me hooked, and the rest is history.

M

Michaela Kandzer 02:37

Yeah, and I think that's interesting, too. Because whenever I think about nutrition, right, I just think about the food that I eat every day or think about the food pyramid or think about making sure I eat you know vegetables and fruits and a fullâ€”a balanced meal, per se. But really underneath the surface, there's so much more to nutrition, right? So you are a registered dietitian, so can you tell us what that means and about the work of registered dietitians?

K

Karla Shelnuttt 03:00

Sure, so registered dietitian nutritionists, or RDNs, we are nutrition professionals and we've completed certain academic and professional requirements that basically make us experts in this field and qualifies us to provide nutrition counselingâ€”provide nutrition informationâ€”that other people who have not had this training are not qualified to provide. But RDNs work in a variety of areas. So you have clinical registered dietitian nutritionists who work in hospitals. I do community nutrition, so there are dietitians that work out in the community. There are dietitians in industry, there are dietitians in sports. So, there are dietitian lobbyists in D.C. who work on policy related issues. So really, whatever it is that you're interested in related to food and nutrition, there's likely a dietitian that works in that area.

M

Michaela Kandzer 03:54

Okay, so you said that you are a community dietitian. So what does that mean? What does that look like?

K

Karla Shelnuttt 03:59

Sure, so, the University of Florida is a land-grant university. And if you're familiar with land-grant universities, we have a threefold mission, which is teaching, research, and Extension. And everybody knows about teaching, right? Our students take classes. Everybody knows about research because we are at an R1 institution. We're expected to get grants and do research, and that's what we like to do. But a lot of people haven't heard of that third mission, which is

Extension. And we like to call it the threefold mission where it's the three legged stool where each leg is as important as the next, but Extension always seems to be left out—the students don't know, faculty and staff don't know. And in Extension, we are the education arm of the university, the outreach arm. So we take the science that happens at the universities, the research, and we translate it into educational programs for the community. Those programs are implemented by University of Florida faculty and staff out in the communities. So FNP (Family Nutrition Program) is in 40 counties, of Florida's 67 counties, and EFNEP (Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program) is in four. So we partner with people out in the community to help reach our audience and provide that information, so we are out in the community as an Extension program.

M

Michaela Kandzer 05:14

Yeah, I really appreciate you, though, sharing that definition of Extension, because that really is, you know, integral into what you do and your role as a community dietitian. So, what does nutrition look like throughout society? How do things like income level or education or other socio-demographic elements, how does that play into nutrition?

K

Karla Shelnutt 05:32

Great question. And the issue about socioeconomic status or income level is important to me, because my research and Extension programs focus on food insecurity and increasing food access for families who have low income, who don't have the resources necessary to buy the right kind of foods to live an active and healthy life. So, people who are food insecure tend to have a less healthy diet than people who have higher SES, or higher socioeconomic status, and are able to access that really nutrient dense, nutritious food. And so families who don't get that food and are eating more processed food that's not as good for you tend to have an increased risk for certain chronic diseases than those who do have access to those foods. So income level definitely plays a role in the types of foods that people eat. And then when we talk about age, right, in both of the nutrition education programs that I work with, we work with youth, as well as adults, as well as older adults. And so, depending on the audience that we're talking to, will depend on what curriculum we use, what messages we relay. So with the little kids, right, the parents are still making those decisions. So we teach them about nutrition, but we really have to reach those parents, because they're the ones making the food choices for the household. Then as the kids get a little bit older, middle school, high school, they're like, making their own decisions, choosing their own foods. So we're really trying to get them when they're younger, teach them about nutrition, help change the environments that they're in so that it's easier to make the healthy choice. So we make the healthy choice the easy choice, is what we like to say. So depending on what age someone is, is whether or not they're able to make those changes themselves, or if we have to connect with the rest of the family to support those healthy habits.

M

Michaela Kandzer 07:25

Yeah, and that makes a lot of sense. And you use the term the "right kind of foods." So what is the right kind of food? What is not the right kind of food?

K

Karla Shelnuttt 07:33

Sure, so, you know, we like to say, as dietitians, that all foods fit, right. There is national guidance—the dietary guidelines are released every five years by the USDA and Department of Health and Human Services. And then the USDA also has the food guidance system that we use to help teach about nutrition in all of our programs. So if you've seen the latest food guidance system—it's been around for a little while now—but it's a plate. You mentioned the pyramid before, but it is now a plate. And if you look at the plate, one of the easiest messages and what we teach people is you want to make half of your plate fruits and vegetables, right. So we're trying to get a variety of foods within all of the food groups. But in looking at the plate, you want half of your plate fruits and vegetables, and then we've got the grains group, protein foods, and dairy. So when we're thinking about grains, we're really targeting those whole grains. And with dairy foods, we want, you know, the low fat and nonfat options to help decrease the amount of saturated fat that's consumed. We want the lean protein options that make up a majority of the diet.

M

Michaela Kandzer 08:40

Okay, and how does that relate to being food insecure?

K

Karla Shelnuttt 08:44

So people who don't have resources to purchase, let's say, you know, a majority or half of their plate to be fruits and vegetables. Maybe they don't have access to the fruits and vegetables that they're interested in eating. Or maybe, you know, they can only afford food that is more processed, that's easier to access. You know, we talk about food deserts, which are communities where there isn't a market that has these fresh foods available within a mile of where they live in an urban setting. These families have a harder time being able to make half of their plate fruits and vegetables because they don't have access to those foods. So that definitely impacts the quality of the food they consume and what their plates look like.

M

Michaela Kandzer 09:24

Yeah, and so, you said that food deserts—so that's one of the ways that food security is impacted. But what are some of those other factors that may cause families to be food insecure?

K

Karla Shelnuttt 09:33

You know, if we think about what's happened in the past with COVID, we've had a lot of families who have lost their jobs. We have a lot of families who have had to stand in line at a food bank or a food pantry for the very first time in their lives because they unexpectedly lost their job and they no longer had the resources to feed their family. So of course, employment is going to have an issue, or is going to contribute to the issue of food security and having those resources

to purchase the food that's needed. So COVID has really made things harder for a lot of our families. And so the need for these Extension programs that support families has increased for sure.

M

Michaela Kandzer 10:12

Yeah, for sure. So can you tell me about some of the research that you have conducted related to nutrition and to food?

K

Karla Shelnutt 10:18

Sure. So the two programs—the Family Nutrition Program (FNP) and the Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP)—we work with families and we teach about nutrition. We also do food demonstrations, we do cooking classes. But you know, pre COVID, when we were all getting together and having these classes, it's difficult for some of our families to actually make it to a two hour cooking class, right? If you think about some of the barriers: Time, right? Maybe the family has a job or more than one job, and it's hard for them to leave their family to come to a two hour nutrition class or cooking class. Transportation, do they have the ability to get to our cooking classes? Number three, childcare? Right? Maybe we have a mother who's got several kids, and she's unable to find childcare so she can get there. So we were thinking about ways to help our families overcome some of these barriers. And so we thought, well, what about food delivery or some kind of meal kit program. And so we came up with the idea of testing a meal kit program for our families, but finding a meal kit program or developing one that is lower cost and more sustainable, right. So you have these big national chains like HelloFresh, where people can have these boxes of food delivered to their homes, which are great, right, I've done one for several years, and they're very convenient. But they can be very expensive, so not necessarily accessible for our SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) eligible families. So we have been testing a model, funded through the Walmart Foundation, where we have partnered with local high schools, who have a culinary arts program, and that are located in an area of low income. And so the chef and the students purchase the food and put the kits together for us. And all the kits contain healthy recipes, and enough ingredients to prepare the recipe to feed four people. And so we're testing this model, instead of food delivery, the families come to the school to pick up the kits. And we're feeding them for six weeks. And we're collecting data at baseline, post six weeks, and then six months long term follow up. And we're looking at things like anthropometrics, biometrics. We want to look at fruit and vegetable intake, or dietary quality. Stress, you know, perceived stress. We have this neat instrument, it's called the Veggie Meter, which is an objective measure of fruit and vegetable intake. It looks like a pencil sharpener, and you put your finger in it and there's a light that measures the carotenoids in your skin that's correlated to your fruit and vegetable intake. So in addition to people filling out a whole bunch of surveys for us and self reporting their food intake, we can actually look at their numbers and see what changes over the six weeks and if their dietary quality has improved. So we want to—we're doing this research to provide access to healthier foods, to introduce new foods to families who may not have, you know, tried certain vegetarian meals before. We're providing indirect nutrition education through handouts that they get in these meals that they pick up once a week. We're also helping to equip their kitchen to be able to prepare these meals by providing them with pots and pans and other kitchen utensils that are required to make these foods.

M Michaela Kandzer 13:32

That is really cool. That is really exciting and really interesting. So thank you for sharing that. I like the Veggie Meter—is that what you called it?

K Karla Shelnuttt 13:39

Uh huh. Yeah.

M Michaela Kandzer 13:40

Yeah, I love that. And that's really neat, too, that you guys are able to collect, like, real hard data instead of having people self report. So that's really exciting, that's interesting.

K Karla Shelnuttt 13:50

Yeah, I'll have to take it to your office and you can check your Veggie Meter score.

M Michaela Kandzer 13:53

Yeah, I know. Actually, I'm kind of curious. [Laughter]. So, you mentioned the SNAP program. So what is the SNAP program? And how does that help families make healthier choices when it comes to food and nutrition?

K Karla Shelnuttt 14:07

So SNAP is the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. That's the benefits side, right. That's where families qualify for benefits based on income and other factors, and they receive an EBT card that they use to purchase food at the grocery store. The UF/IFAS Extension Family Nutrition Program is SNAP Education (SNAP-Ed). So we are the education arm of the SNAP program. And we are funded by the USDA Food and Nutrition Service that goes to Florida Department of Children and Families that comes to UF/IFAS Extension. And so the purpose of SNAP-Ed—or FNP is what we call it, the Family Nutrition Program—is to provide nutrition education to families who are eligible for SNAP benefits. And so, EFNEP also serves the same audience, it's just funded a little bit differently, but both programs teach families to make better choices. We also teach families to stretch their food dollars on a limited budget, right. So we're teaching food resource management skills, teaching them strategies at the grocery store where they can maximize their nutrient density on a budget, which is important. So we're addressing food security in that way. And also increasing their nutrition knowledge and changing behaviors is our goal, right? We want them to improve their dietary quality, increase physical activity, and save money at the grocery store. And so we do that through nutrition education. But we also get to do this really fun piece—it's called policy systems and environmental approaches. And this is where we change their environment, as I said before, to make the healthy choice, the easy choice. So whether that's a policy change, whether it's helping put in a community garden in a food desert, a school garden at an eligible school,

partnering with a farmers market and farmers so that they accept SNAP benefits or even Double [Up Food] Bucks so that our families have access to healthy foods near them. Our faculty and staff work on all of those issues to support SNAP eligible families.

M

Michaela Kandzer 16:11

Yeah, okay, that's really cool, and that makes a lot of sense. And you talked about, you know, these programs and you guys at the University of Florida, and through the research effort you were just talking about, you guys are educating these families directly and indirectly. So what are kind of some of those modes of education that you guys use? Yeah, that makes sense. And I feel like the PIE Center is seeing that in some of their research too about different things about, you know, that desire and that need for hybrid education and outreach opportunities. Everybody has a different situation, right?

K

Karla Shelnuttt 16:28

Sure. So pre-COVID, everything was face-to-face, group education, right? We partner with other organizations, within our communities that are already reaching our audience. So that's a strong component, is these partnerships and working together for collective impact. And we would go to a site and teach a group or go to a school and teach a class of kids. And then of course, COVID hit and the world changed. And so we had to pivot, as everyone is saying, and learn how to deliver nutrition education through a virtual platform. And so now we're at a place where we're providing a mixture, right, we're able to reach different audiences virtually that we didn't have before. But we still have, you know, families and participants who prefer that face-to-face interaction in a group. So we provide through group education in person, and we're also doing virtual education—both at the same time. Right, right.

M

Michaela Kandzer 17:35

So, what does it look like to make healthier choices? And does it look different for everyone based on their current knowledge of nutrition, or what their current food choices are?

K

Karla Shelnuttt 17:46

It is going to be different for every person, right? Because while there is national guidance and recommendations on what we should eat, everyone is starting at a different place. And the thing about making changes to your dietary intake is, you don't want to make a bunch of changes all at once because that is going to overwhelm and is not sustainable, right? We talk about making smaller changes that eventually lead up to some really great health benefits. And the newest dietary guidelines that were released, they have a tagline which basically says, "Make every bite count," right? So if you're wanting to make changes and improve your nutrition, think about your dietary pattern, so everything that you eat in a day. And that every time you're eating something or drinking something or deciding what to eat or drink, like, that's an opportunity to make that bite count, right? So whether it's choosing a whole grain over a refined grain, or maybe instead of drinking a sugar sweetened beverage, you're gonna have a

cup of water instead. So at that moment, how can I maximize the nutrition that I'm currently consuming at that moment? So small changes, thinking about how those small changes lead to bigger health benefits in the future.

M Michaela Kandzer 18:58

Yeah, I like that. What was that tagline again? It wasâ€“make every bite count?

K Karla Shelnutt 19:01

Make every bite count, mm-hmm.

M Michaela Kandzer 19:02

Yeah, I like that. I feel like I need to take that home with me personally. [Laughter].

K Karla Shelnutt 19:06

Yeah. [Laughter]. I was hungry right before this. And I was like, there's a bowl of candy. But I went for the blueberries that were just as sweet, I'm very proud of myself. I made those bites count by not eating the Reese's that I really wanted. Not that I'm saying that that's a bad thing, because I probably will have a Reese's later, butâ€“[Laughter].

M Michaela Kandzer 19:22

Everything in moderation, right? [Laughter]. So why should our listeners care about nutrition? Why is nutrition important?

K Karla Shelnutt 19:29

Think about your health, right? Of all the things that we can do to stay healthy and prevent future chronic diseases, it's what we're putting in our body now, right? What does our intake look like? How can we maximize our nutrition? And not just nutrition, right? There's so many different things that impact health, nutrition is one factor, it's important. But physical activity, right? There's stress management. There's so many different factors associated with health, and nutrition is one important factorâ€“that if we start making every bite count and looking at our plate and eating more fruits and vegetablesâ€“it really is going to help in the long run with preventing different chronic diseases and making you an overall healthier person who's happier and has a better quality of life.

M Michaela Kandzer 20:14

Yeah, which is really important, right? We only get one.



Karla Shelnuttt 20:17

Mm-hmm, we only get one. Let's make it a good one. Exactly.



Michaela Kandzer 20:19

Yeah. So, what part can our listeners play when it comes to making healthier food decisions? And how can they help others do the same?



Karla Shelnuttt 20:26

You know, one of the things that I think your listeners can do is if your family members or friends are trying to make better choices, providing that support, right? Because it can be really hard to be the only person in your circle who wants to make these choices and it's not supported by friends or family. So really, you know, paying attention to friends or family who might be trying to make better choices and supporting that, and maybe changing plans because you know that it's going to be hard for your friend or family member to make better choices at a certain place or something like that. So really being that support to implement that I think goes a long way with friends and family.



Ricky Telg 21:10

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