

Nutritious  
food is like  
medicine for  
the body.

## food lab

# The New Healthy Eating

It's a means to live stronger and to empower others to do the same. Find out how to use food to make the planet a better place. *By Pam O'Brien*

**F**ood is a powerful tool, says Angela Odoms-Young, Ph.D., a professor of kinesiology and nutrition at the University of Illinois College of Applied Health Sciences. "A healthy diet helps support your immune system and reduces inflammation. That's critical because inflammation and immune function play an important role in chronic conditions and infectious diseases like COVID-19."

Equally important is the role eating plays in bringing us together. "Food is community," Odoms-Young says. "Our most significant memories include eating. Food means someone cares about you. That's why people who don't have good food options in their neighborhoods feel so forgotten."

At a time when we need to bridge what divides us, here are the things you can do to eat better—and feed the changes that make everyone healthier.



*Angela Odoms-Young, Ph.D., creates policies that can help people live healthier.*

## TAKE THE VEGETABLE CHALLENGE

"We've proved that a plant-based diet is good for us, but many people still don't eat enough vegetables," Odoms-Young says. Strive to add them to every meal. "Toss them in your scrambled eggs. Incorporate them into pasta or chili. Make a vegetable topper for fish. Experiment with creative ways of including them in your diet."

## SIP SMART

"Consuming fewer sweetened drinks is one of the best things we can do for our health. There are so many sugar-sweetened beverages available today, including energy drinks and sports drinks—things we think are healthy but aren't," Odoms-Young says. "Read the labels on bottles, and check the nutrition facts at restaurants so you know how much added sugar they contain."

## TRY A NEW TOOL

The right equipment can make healthy cooking easier so you're more likely to do it, even on busy nights. "I just got an electric pressure cooker, and it's wonderful," Odoms-Young says. "For instance, you can cook beans in it without soaking them. I put them in the pressure cooker with garlic, onion, and herbs, and they were ready in 30 minutes. It's much less labor intensive."

## BRING EVERYONE TO THE TABLE

There are three ways you can do that, Odoms-Young says. 1) Read and learn about what people in low-income areas are facing. "Find out what their constraints are," she says. "One exercise I give my students is to live on the food budget given to those on SNAP [the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program], which is about \$1.33 a meal per person. That puts it in perspective." 2) Volunteer at a food bank or a community organization in an underserved neighborhood. 3) Be an advocate for change. "Get involved in local policy actions," Odoms-Young says. "There are coalitions springing up across the country to create healthier environments. Find one and join it. Advocacy can help move the needle so we all can have a better quality of life." ■