

Programs that work

In our spirit of celebrating the success of the medical profession, the Medical Post brings you PROGRAMS THAT WORK. We profile programs, big and small, clinical and otherwise, that are making a difference to patients and doctors in a positive way. We talk to the doctors who helped make them happen and encourage other communities to replicate and customize the programs in their area.

Healthy eating program offers breast cancer survivors food tips and social contact

by Pierre Lachaine

TORONTO | For many women, a breast cancer diagnosis can throw the often delicate balance of work and family off kilter. The result is often personal neglect, especially when it comes to eating right.

FoodShare Toronto's Good Food for Life program aims to teach pre-menopausal women, who have or have had breast cancer within the last three years, how to stay on course by eating well and staying healthy. Once a week for eight weeks, groups of 10 to 12 women get together to learn, cook and socialize.

"This program is not only to deal with the sheer facts of better nutrition, but also to explore feelings and emotions around food. It's a very communal thing," said Dr. Julia Lee, a member of Food Share's board of directors.

Much of what is learned may be common sense, like eating more fruit and vegetables, but Good Food for Life reminds women to relax and not take their health for granted.

"There's a lot of pressure on them to almost neglect themselves in the battle for survival. This program helps women get to a place where they can meet other women who are trying to work and raise a family," said Dr. Lee. "They make a meal and eat together."

Themed discussions

Every week, a different theme is discussed. There are classes that focus on fruit, vegetables, grains, beans and legumes, fish and lean meats, eggs and calcium-rich foods.

In the fruit class, for example, the women learn four recipes: cold mango soup, wholewheat pasta salad with dried fruit, fruit compote and salmon kebobs with mango/papaya salsa.

The recipes are all designed to be quick and easy to make, according to Louise Huneault, a chef/educator who teaches many of the classes and helped design the cooking curriculum.

Classes begin with a snack and a tutorial on the subject at hand. For example, the "convenience foods" class involves learning how to read and interpret labels.

The women then break up into groups, depending on which recipe they've chosen to make that day, and start cooking.

After about an hour, the women sit and eat together.

Chef/educator Louise Huneault, who teaches and helped design the cooking curriculum, said the program would lend itself well to people with other types of cancer or diabetes.



Courtesy of Louise Huneault

"The whole program centres around self-directed change. People view food as a way to love themselves or punish themselves. It's recognizing those aspects of food that is particularly important." —Louise Huneault

"We actually take the time to enjoy the food because mindful eating is a large part of the program. We teach them to sit down in a calm environment to eat. That doesn't include the car!" said Huneault.

After the meal, the psychosocial component of the program begins.

"The whole program centres around self-directed change. People view food as a way to love themselves or punish themselves. It's recognizing those aspects of food that is particularly important," said Huneault.

So far, 70 women have gone through the program, which is scheduled to last until January 2008. Of the seven sessions in the series, three are being evaluated qualitatively, where the women are being interviewed before and after the session to gauge the effect on their lives. The results aren't in yet, but the hope is that the program will be extended.

Huneault said she even sees the program extending beyond breast cancer.

"This program can be applied to anybody interested in learning how to eat healthily, because it's just basic, sound nutrition. There's nothing magical being taught here," she said.

There have already been requests to expand the program, and Huneault said it would lend itself well to people with different types of cancers and diabetes.

Program at a glance

Program: Good Food for Life

Where: Fall session location to be determined

Program Co-ordinator: Sandra Flear

What it does: Provides practical assistance, health promotion and education, ongoing social contact and support, and the potential for lifelong healthy changes to improve quality of life for breast cancer survivors

Phone: (416) 363-6441 ext. 248

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If you would like to suggest a program to be profiled, please e-mail the editor: rick.campbell@medicalpost.rogers.com.

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