

# Healthy eating in a 'desert'

Austin residents learn to make the most of limited food options

By **Patty Pansa**  
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

The single banana that Michelle Tranter held up looked puny compared with the oversize bunch in her other hand.

But that baby-size banana — about half the size of the largest of the bunch — is actually one serving of fruit. Tranter, a community dietitian for Jewel-Osco, was demonstrating portion control, as well as healthy substitutions and creativity with meals, to a group of residents from the Austin neighborhood on a recent weekday.

More than 25 people joined in the discussion and healthy-eating tour put on by the Jewel-Osco store, AARP and the Westside Health Authority.

While many in the group have chronic conditions such as diabetes and high blood pressure, the diet Tranter described applies to everyone. It's especially relevant during the holidays, when many are apt to overeat, she said.

"It really all boils down to portion control — using smaller plates at Thanksgiving and Christmas," said Tranter, ticking off other healthy-eating tips such as including bright vegetables in a meal, limiting sauces and sugar, and picking products that are low in sodium and fat.

Tranter's goal is to get people to think about small changes they will stick with, not drastic ones they'll ditch.

For example, switching from whole milk to skim milk would be great, but drinking 2 percent milk instead of whole milk is good, too, she said.

Some in the group had already started making healthier choices, but the pull of junk food still poses a challenge. During the banana demonstration, one group member confided in another that she likes crunchy snacks like potato chips.

"It's not to say you're going to be perfect," Tranter told the group. "It's about making better choices more often."

Austin resident Lonia Sneed, 50, began cooking healthier several



Registered dietitian Michelle Tranter, right, gives a thumbs-up to squash as she gives healthy-eating tips to a group of Austin residents at a Jewel-Osco store in River Forest. ALEX GARCIA/TRIBUNE PHOTO

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—Dietitian Michelle Tranter

years ago when her mother was diagnosed with diabetes. Sneed herself said she has high blood pressure and is borderline diabetic. But she said she was able to get off blood pressure medicine five years ago because of dietary changes.

Before, Sneed prepared greens with salt pork and lard. Now, she uses smoked turkey and "it still tastes just as good."

"It was something I really needed to do — I wanted to do," Sneed said of changing her diet. After the presentation, she said, "Now, I can have everything and anything I want, just in the right portion."

For residents in the Austin com-

munity, just finding a grocery store that has fresh produce and other healthy food can be a problem, said Cody McSellers-McCray, Westside Health Authority's director of health promotions.

There are no major grocery stores in the community, and getting to Oak Park and River Forest to shop can be inconvenient and uncomfortable for some, she said. The neighborhood lacks fitness centers and walking trails, too.

Carmenza Millan of AARP called the Austin neighborhood a "food desert," or an area with few or no options for shopping for healthy food. As such, the national senior advocacy group has targeted the Austin, Englewood and Bronzeville neighborhoods — three food deserts — for programming to prevent chronic diseases.

"As we age, we increase the risk of chronic disease," said Millan, AARP's associate state director for community outreach. "That is a threat for all of us. The good thing is we can prevent [chronic diseases] with good nutrition and exercise."

According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, being overweight or obese is a leading risk factor for Type 2 diabetes.

Tranter focused her demonstration on healthy eating for diabetics. But she said her advice is applicable to all. Everyone should avoid overdoing it with foods that either increase blood sugar levels or have too much fat, she said.

During the tour of the River Forest store, Tranter compared food labels on packaged products and shared tips about healthy substitutions. For example, she roasts a spaghetti squash with olive oil, scrapes out the stringy inside and tops it with tomato sauce to accompany chicken Parmesan.

Annie Smith, 57, an Austin resident, said she wants to try Tranter's squash idea to "see it turn into spaghetti." One of her goals is to stop taking her thyroid medicine.

"I hadn't eaten oatmeal since the eighth grade. Now, I eat it most mornings," she said. "I want to feel good."

**NOTES**

**ALZHEIMER'S SUPPORT**

Smith Village hosts its monthly meeting for adult children of seniors with memory loss challenges. The December topic will be "Alzheimer's and Sexuality." A 30 minute movie, "A Thousand Tomorrows," will be shown before a question and answer session led by Diane Morgan. Light refreshments will be served, 6:30 p.m. Tuesday. Free. Registration required. 2320 W. 113th Place. Call 773-474-7300.

**HOLIDAY STRESS**

Learn simple and reliable meditation techniques to remain calm, energized and centered during the holidays. Registration required. Call 773-878-9936, ext. 5660, 6:30 p.m. Tuesday. Free. Swedish Covenant Hospital, Galter LifeCenter, Studio 4, 5157 N. Francisco Ave.

**JOINT-PAIN SEMINAR**

This educational seminar focuses on knee and hip joint pain and arthritis with an opportunity to meet with a Weiss Memorial Hospital orthopedic surgeon. 2:30 p.m. Thursday. Free. Registration required. Medical Office Building Atrium, 4646 N. Marine Drive. Call 800-503-1234.

**SENIOR CARE DISCUSSION**

Paul Hogan, CEO of Home Instead Senior Care will discuss the many options available today for senior care. Topics will include, financial planning, caregiving for an elderly parent and insurance options. 10 a.m. Wednesday. Free. Resurrection Retirement Community, 7262 W. Peterson Ave. Call 847-673-1250.

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