

Taming the Special Needs Physique

January 2007
by Dawn Villarreal
Autism Community Connection
www.autismcommunityconnection.com
<http://health.groups.yahoo.com/group/autismcc/>



While I have seen no study on this subject, I would bet that a high percentage of moms with special needs children have what I call the “special needs physique.” We didn’t start out this way but we most assuredly have gained more than our share of pounds over the years while we have taken care of our kids.

Is it stress? That’s certainly a component. But a lot of it has to do with time or lack of it. In the few moments we have to ourselves, us moms are running the race of our lives to get errands accomplished. When mid-morning or afternoon snack time rears its head, it just seems easier to grab whatever is convenient instead of healthy.

After school it’s off to the races again to get to whatever therapy of the day our special needs child is in or extra-curricular event our other children are enrolled. If we are lucky we have already prepared a meal for the family but more than likely, on these days, we make a run to whatever fast food place is available.

Hats off to the special needs mom who works and still manages to keep the household. There must be days when going to the bathroom is an inconvenience to a fully loaded schedule.

As a mother with a special needs physique, I wondered, “How did I get to this place and how can I change this cycle?” I am proud to say that I have lost and kept off 20 pounds and hope to lose a few more now that the holidays are over. Here is what I learned.

YOU ARE PRICELESS

We put all our energy and resources into raising our children but don’t spend enough time on ourselves. Assess your current situation. Does your spouse know how to handle the house and kid schedule if you were out of commission? Where would your family be without you?

Face the facts; we are the spit and glue holding our precarious house of cards together. We can’t afford the kind of ailments that poor eating habits can bring to a family. If not for yourself, decide that it is in your family’s best interest to devote some time to a healthier lifestyle.

NUTRITIONIST

Once I decided to push for a healthier me, I hired a Lifetime Fitness nutritionist. The nutritionist gives you a crash course on serving sizes, how much to eat in a given meal and what types of foods to eat at each meal. He/she analyzes your current eating habits and works within your parameters. Rather than forcing a diet that didn’t fit my

lifestyle, my nutritionist educated me on how to look for healthy food at the grocery store, fast food restaurant, etc. so I could make my own informed choices. This is not a diet but rather a nutritional lifestyle change. Here is what I learned.

INCREASE WATER, DECREASE SUGAR

Are you drinking a lot of soda? Start adding a glass or two of water and less soda every two weeks. For those that need flavor, the nutritionist recommended the flavored Propel water. Start drinking unsweetened iced tea. Stop using sugar in your coffee and tea and switch to Splenda. Experiment with other drinks that use less sugar. You would be surprised to know how much sugar is in all the foods we eat, especially our drinks. Limiting the amount of sugar in our drinks is the easiest place to control our sugar intake.

WHAT TO EAT, WHEN TO EAT

The nutritionist showed me how to balance my food groups during the day so I was never hungry. You should eat six meals a day. My meal plan was designed to help me lose up to 1.4 lbs a week. My meals were roughly three hours apart. The meal plan below is a balanced nutritional diet. I don't have to count calories because as long as I am following this plan I am within my calorie range.

Meal 1 (breakfast) – 2 starches, 1 fruit, 1 milk, 1 protein, 1 fat

Meal 2 (mid-morning snack) - 1 fruit, 1 protein, 1 fat

Meal 3 (lunch) – 1 starch, 1 vegetables, 3 protein, 1 fat

Meal 4 (mid-afternoon snack) – 1 starch, 1 fruit, 1 protein, 1 fat

Meal 5 (dinner) – 2 starches, 2 vegetables, 4 protein, 2 fat

Meal 6 (evening snack) – 1 starch, 1 protein, 2 fat (If you are not a night-time snacker then you can add those servings into another part of the day)

The idea is to become aware of what you are eating during the day and find foods that you enjoy to fill those categories. For instance, I used to just grab a couple cookies mid-morning when I felt hungry. The key was to switch the starch with a protein to keep my energy levels up. So now I'll grab a string cheese and half a banana. It was just as fast and it keeps me going until lunch.

If I am unable to eat a particular serving, I can move that into another part of the day. So for instance, if I knew I was going to a dinner party and maybe eating more, I could pare down the other meals of my day. If I had pizza for lunch and didn't eat enough protein, I could add that to my dinner

KNOW YOUR SERVING SIZES

1 serving = to

1 Starch = to 15g carbohydrate

1 Fruit = to 15g carbohydrate

1 Vegetable = 5g carbohydrate

1 Protein = 7g protein (1 oz)

1 Milk = 1 cup skim or 1% milk

1 Fat = 5g fat

All I really have to know is how much of my foods equal one serving size. As an example, for lunch I can eat one serving size of a starch, vegetable and fat and three servings of a protein. So my lunch might be a slice of wheat bread, 3 oz of meat and one half cup of cooked vegetables (or one cup raw vegetables). I'll get my fat from my protein. Here are some websites from dieticians that do a good job breaking this down.

These links will give you the info to plan your own individual menu:

Food Group and Serving Size List from Mayo Clinic -

http://www.mayoclinic.com/images/pdfs/p14_fg-servinglist.pdf

Serving Sizes Guide from NutrActive - <http://www.nutractive.com/servingsizes.htm>

What does a serving size look like? Have trouble visualizing what half a cup looks like?

These links will help:

Serving Size Card <http://hp2010.nhlbihin.net/portion/servingcard7.pdf>

Portion Size Helper: http://www.hap.org/healthy_living/womens/portion_size_helper.php

HEALTHY GROCERY SHOPPING

Here are the important things to know before we go into healthy shopping:

15g carbohydrates = 1 serving

7g protein = 1 serving

5g fat = 1 serving

Now print out the sample Nutrition Facts label:

<http://www.cfsan.fda.gov/~dms/foodlab.html>

You are going to write the information below in the margins of the sheet you printed out. I will use the circled numbers from this nutrition facts label.

1 – Always look at the serving size. Make sure it is right for you. Will you really eat that amount? Some cereal serving sizes are only $\frac{1}{4}$ cup.

2 – Calories – Not a factor. Once you learn how to read these nutrition facts labels you will know if it's healthy for you.

3 – Total Fat – In this example the single serving size is 12g fat. We know 1 serving is 5g fat. This is 2.5 servings of fat.

3 – Saturated Fat – The nutritionist said you want to keep saturated fat at less than 4g per item and less than 15 g per day. Monosaturated fat is your #1 choice.

Polyunsaturated fat is your #2 choice.

3 – Trans Fat – You want to keep this at 0 in everything you buy. Not even the smallest amount is good.

3 – Cholesterol – Not a factor. If you are following your serving size and guidelines on fat, you will be within the right amount.

3 – Sodium – less than 500mg is best, 500-800mg is okay and anything over is not good. The nutritionist said to keep your sodium between 2500-3500mg per day.

3 – Total Carbohydrate – In this example the single serving size is 31g. We know that 1 serving is 15g carbohydrate. This is about 2 servings of carbohydrates or starch.

3 – Dietary Fiber – 3g or more is good for any food product. The nutritionist said to get 20-27g of fiber per day.

3 – Sugars – Not a factor.

4 – Vitamins/minerals – Not a factor. As long as you are following these guidelines you should be getting the correct nutrients.

Ingredients List: This is not on the nutrition facts label but it is important. The ingredients will be listed in the order of quantity with the #1 item being the largest ingredient down to the least. The nutritionist said to limit products with enriched wheat flour. Look for unbleached wheat flour. Limit high fructose corn syrup or fractionated palm kernel oil (there are the same thing) chemicals. Avoid partially hydrogenated oils which is another name for saturated fat and hydrogenated oils which is another name for trans fat.

So if I go grocery shopping and I want to buy one of those frozen lunches I go in armed with my three main categories:

15g carbohydrates = 1 serving

7g protein = 1 serving

5g fat = 1 serving

My meal plan for lunch says that I should have 1 serving starch 15g (carbohydrate), 3 servings protein 21g and 1 serving fat 5g. I quickly look at the Total Fat, Total Carbohydrate and Total Protein sections to see if my frozen lunch comes in close to those levels. If it's way off I put it back. If it's reasonable then I will check the other items I outlined above.

I can do this for all food items I buy at the store. Leave the kids with Dad and take one evening to just walk the aisles and look at the foods you usually buy. See how they stack up and what alternatives you might want to try.

FAST FOOD/CHAIN RESTAURANTS

The average fast food meal is 800 calories. So think of that every time you go to a drive thru. If you have to have eat a fast food breakfast meal I was told to order McDonalds Egg McMuffin without the cheese. If you can't live without the hash browns, take two bites and throw away the rest.

Stay away from cheese and French fries. Again, if you just have to have those fries, eat six and throw away the rest. The best lunch/dinner place is Wendy's grilled chicken with as little condiments/toppings as you can stand. The nutritionist urged to take off the top bun or cut as much off as possible. Salads do not count as eating a vegetable. They fill you up with little nutritional value.

If you go to a restaurant just remember what your serving size is for food. You are usually receiving double or sometimes triple a serving size depending on the meal. A safe bet is to cut your meal in half and take the rest home for lunch the next day. Choose food that is grilled, don't eat the rolls at the table, stay away from salads and ask that vegetables not be cooked with butter. Look for cuts of meat or ground sirloin

instead of ground beef. Healthy menu buzzwords: grilled, steamed, garden fresh, broiled, baked, roasted, poaches, lightly sautéed or stir-fried.

Ethnic cuisine choices:

Chinese: steamed, jum (poached), kow (roasted), shu (barbecued), steamed rice, items made without MSG

Italian: red sauces, primavera (no cream), piccata (lemon), sun-dried tomatoes, crushed tomatoes, lightly sautéed, grilled chicken or fish

Mexican: items made without lard, shredded chicken, rice and black beans, salsa, soft corn tortillas, barbacoa (barbecue)

You can also go to www.calorieking.com and enter a fast food restaurant in their search. They will break down every meal into total fat, carbohydrate, protein, etc.

FINAL TIPS

- Create a check off list/food diary to make sure you are eating the right kinds of foods.
- Write down the serving sizes of the foods you like so you have them handy.
- Eat healthier and enjoy your food. Let's say you change from eating crackers as a snack to cottage cheese and fruit. It's far better to eat the regular cottage cheese that you like than to buy the low fat cottage cheese that might taste yucky and you quit eating it.
- Don't beat yourself up for minor infractions. Have that piece of birthday cake. As long as you are following your meal plan, a slip up once a week will not be a big deal.
- Don't kill yourself counting all the grams. You'll go crazy unless you round up or down. If a carbohydrate serving is 15g, half of that is 7.5g. If you go to a grocery store and something is 33g (2 servings +3g) just round it down to 2 servings. If something is 40g (2 servings +10g) round up to 3 servings because it has gone over the halfway point of 7.5g.

Special Offer from Lifetime Fitness (Romeoville) to Special Needs Families

After writing this article I contacted my nutritionist Lisa Schwinn and asked if Lifetime Fitness could give an offer to special needs families who want to learn how to eat healthier.

They have graciously offered to waive all fees for an initial nutritional consultation along with a sample menu. Then you can decide (for free) if seeing a nutritionist is the right fit for you. Usually you need a membership to Lifetime Fitness for the consultation and any follow up meetings. However, Lisa said she would be able to secure up to six follow up sessions without becoming a Lifetime Fitness member.

If you are ready to stop trying fad diets and talk to a real nutritionist, contact Lisa Schwinn at Lifetime Fitness (630-759-9995) in Bolingbrook/Romeoville on Weber Rd near I-55. Just reference this article or myself when you call. Plan on bringing in at least one days worth of a food diary so she will get a feel for your eating habits.