

Seven reasons to enjoy a Feast of the Seven Fishes this holiday season

Head-to-toe health benefits

In my family, we like to enjoy some quality, local seafood on Christmas Eve.

This tradition stems from the “Festa dei Sette Pesci” or “Feast of the Seven Fishes.”

The concept behind this feast actually dates back to the early Roman Catholic custom of abstaining from eating meat on the eve of certain holy days, including Christmas.

But the Feast of the Seven Fishes is primarily an American holiday. Many Italian-American immigrants who settled in port cities—like Boston and my old hometown of Gloucester, Massachusetts—were fishermen. So, by preparing a seven-course seafood meal for the holidays, it made them feel closer to home.

What those early immigrants might not have known, though, is that their fish feasts didn't just make them feel good emotionally. Recent scientific research shows that eating fish and seafood has many physical and mental health benefits as well.

In fact, there are seven key ways in which fish, fish oil, and shellfish can boost your health not only during the holidays, but throughout the entire year.

That's why I happily enjoy local seafood on many special occasions throughout the year. And now, after learning about this latest research,

I hope you will also join me in this tradition...

Seven health benefits from the seven seas

Scientists have studied fish and shellfish's effect on humans from literally head-to-toe. And there's evidence that this bounty from the sea can improve health in myriad ways. Some of the most convincing research falls into the following categories:

1. Supplies key dietary nutrients.

As you know, fatty fish and seafood like salmon, trout, sardines, tuna, mackerel, and oysters are top sources of essential omega-3 fatty acids—including EPA and DHA, which the body can't make itself and must get from the diet and/or through supplementation.

In addition, all fish are excellent sources of vitamin D, calcium, iodine, iron, magnesium, phosphorus, and potassium. And, of course, fish and shellfish are loaded with protein.

2. Supports cardiovascular health.

There's substantial evidence that fish oil is useful to help prevent or treat cardiovascular disease. But in a new scientific article, two doctors from the University of Missouri argue that while there's evidence that the omega-3s in fish reduce the risk of cardiovascular events like heart attacks and strokes, the same may not be true for the omega-3s found in fish oil supplements.¹

However, after reading the article, I found several key flaws in their reasoning. (Remember, fish oil supplements are often attacked—but there's more to each story.)

First of all, the researchers examined studies that measured how fish oil supplements affect cholesterol and triglyceride blood levels. But, as I've pointed out many times before, looking at heart disease through the lens of cholesterol is a flawed and failed theory. Fish oil and omega-3s have a host of other benefits, such as reducing inflammation, that are critical for heart health and general health.

Secondly, the researchers didn't seem to take fish oil *doses* into account.

I always point out (and seem to be one of the only “experts” doing so) that taking the right amount of fish oil

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is key for heart health. And that dose depends *entirely* upon how much (or how little) seafood you're enjoying as part of your healthy diet.

In fact, doctors would never think about not using the right dose of a precious prescription drug, but are truly clueless when it comes to correct and individualized doses of dietary supplements—especially for fish oil and omega-3s.

As I've noted here before, even fish oil studies that use minimally adequate doses *STILL* show heart health benefits. Meanwhile, when researchers use ridiculously low, subtherapeutic amounts, the same benefits, unsurprisingly, aren't observed. But that doesn't discredit fish oils' benefits—it simply highlights the importance of proper dosing (and, in turn, actually confirms the benefits).

For instance, a large trial on fish oil and cardiovascular disease called ASCEND wasted millions of dollars (and a great research opportunity) because the researchers used a dose of fish oil that was obviously too low to clearly show an effect (1 gram). But the REDUCE-IT Trial found a *25 percent drop* in heart disease with a more reasonable dose of 4 grams.²

Plus, another trial called STRENGTH actually showed a 15 percent decrease in heart disease in people who took fish oil supplements, despite the fact that the researchers observed patients for a maximum of *only* 2.5 years. That's nowhere near long enough to see the full benefits of fish oil (and a fraction of the time of most other studies that do show benefits).²

The reality is that there are decades of clinical studies showing fish oil supplements lower risk of heart attacks and sudden cardiac deaths. Fish oil has also been shown to reduce blood pressure, heart rate, and hardening

of the arteries. And it's *safe*—unlike the statin drugs that many doctors are brainwashed into pushing onto their unsuspecting patients.

Bottom line: There's convincing evidence to take fish oil supplements (in the right, individualized doses—see the sidebar on page 3) to prevent cardiovascular disease.

3. Boosts longevity. Considering that fish oil is so beneficial for the heart, it's not surprising that it also substantially increases life expectancy.

In fact, a new study showed that higher levels of omega-3s in the blood boosts longevity by nearly FIVE years!³

The researchers said *just a 1 percent* increase in omega-3 blood levels can reduce mortality as much as quitting smoking.

The new study followed 2,240 people over the age of 65 for an average of 11 years. The researchers discovered that the more fish the study participants ate, the less risk they had from dying of *any cause*.

4. Fights depression. For years, research has linked the omega-3s in fish oil with a reduced risk of depression. A variety of studies have shown that depression is associated with higher levels of inflammation—and, of course, omega-3s are known inflammation fighters.

Plus, an interesting new British study shows that the omega-3s in fish oil can actually pass right into brain cell membranes, where they exert anti-inflammatory effects that help fight depression.

The researchers looked at 22 people diagnosed with major depression. Participants took either 3,000 mg of the omega-3 EPA or 1,400 mg of the omega-3 DHA daily for 12 weeks.

DHA and EPA were measured in the participants' blood before and after treatment. Their depression symptoms were also assessed.

Results showed that both EPA and DHA were associated with significant improvements in mood.

In fact, the EPA group had an average 64 percent drop in depression symptoms. The DHA group's response was better still, with a 71 percent decrease in symptoms.

The researchers also noted that it's unlikely these amounts of DHA and EPA can be obtained only by eating oily fish. So, they suggested fish oil supplementation alongside a healthy, balanced diet.

5. Wards off dementia and

Alzheimer's. For decades, people have referred to fish as "brain food." And now, science has caught up to the popular lore—in fact, an archaeologist has published research linking early humans' brain growth to their shellfish consumption.⁵

About 200,000 years ago, a severe Ice Age descended upon the Earth. Much of the planet cooled down and dried out. Even the once lush plains of the African continent (where the human species is thought to have originated) experienced widespread drought and became a barren, desolate place.

The study found archaeological evidence that some coastal-dwelling humans in South Africa dramatically changed their diets during this glacial period. Specifically, they went from eating plants, animals, and the occasional freshwater fish to regularly eating the abundance of saltwater shellfish that they could gather along the shore.

The human brain also underwent tremendous growth during this period, which the study associates

with the sudden abundance of the omega-3s found in this new marine diet. And as I briefly touched on above, shellfish also contain essential minerals required by the human brain—such as calcium, copper, iodine, iron, magnesium, selenium, and zinc.

These nutrients help neurons communicate with each other and help to improve blood flow throughout the body and brain. And other research shows that a decline in omega-3s in the brain is associated with an increase in dementia, Alzheimer's disease, cognitive problems, and memory loss.

(To learn more about fish and shellfish's role in brain health, check out my *Complete Alzheimer's Fighting Protocol*. [Click here](#) or call 1-866-747-9421 and ask for order code EO3XC00.)

6. Strengthens bones and joints.

Of course, everything's connected in the body, so it's not surprising that the omega-3s in fish have benefits for bones and joints, too. Not to mention the vitamin D, calcium, and magnesium that's abundant in seafood.

In fact, a new animal study found that DHA increased bone-mineral density and bone-mineral deposits.⁶ Researchers were interested to find that DHA increased the height of the growth plate at the end of the bones (the joints) by increasing the number and growth of the cells that make joint cartilage.

This is the first study showing that DHA supports both bone-building and cartilage-building cells, resulting in healthier, stronger bones and joints. As a result, the researchers concluded that fish oil could be an effective option for optimal bone and joint health.

7. Promoting natural pain and arthritis relief. As I mentioned earlier,

fish oil is a potent anti-inflammatory. And since joint pain and arthritis are both caused by inflammation, it makes sense that fish oil could help the millions of people suffering from these conditions every day.

Indeed, one study found that people with neck and back pain who took fish oil found it to be so effective that they *actually discontinued their prescription pain drugs*.⁷

Researchers gathered 250 adults with acute, chronic neck or back pain and asked them to take 1,200 mg (1.2 grams) a day of fish oil (which, as I mentioned earlier, is quite a low dosage).

After an average of 75 days of taking fish oil, 125 of the study participants returned a questionnaire about their pain levels. These questionnaires revealed that 78 percent of the participants took 1,200 mg of fish oil daily, and 22 percent took 2,400 mg a day.

A whopping 60 percent of those people said their pain improved during the study period, and *59 percent* discontinued their prescription nonsteroidal anti-

Supplement wisely with this individualized fish oil dosage guide

If you eat fish every day, there's no need to take fish oil supplements.

If you eat fish four to six times a week, supplement with 1 to 3 grams of fish oil daily, containing 400-950 mg of EPA and 300-700 mg of DHA.

If you eat fish one to three times a week, take 4 to 5 grams of fish oil supplements daily, containing 1,400-1,800 mg of EPA and 1,000-1,300 mg of DHA.

If you don't eat any fish, take 6 grams of fish oil daily, containing 2,000 mg of EPA and 1,500 mg of DHA.

inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs). Almost *90 percent* of the participants said they would continue to take fish oil for pain relief.

The researchers noted that these results mirrored other studies they had conducted showing that fish oil was as effective as ibuprofen at reducing arthritis pain. Plus, a new study showed that more frequent fish consumption reduces rheumatoid arthritis (RA) symptoms...⁸

Researchers gathered 176 people with RA and analyzed the frequency of their fish consumption during the previous year. They also assessed the participants' RA disease activity by measuring C-reactive protein (CRP) levels—an important marker of inflammation.

Results showed that the participants who ate fish two or more times per week had significantly *lower* RA

disease activity compared with patients who never ate fish, or only ate it less than once a month.

And there was a dose-response effect observed, too. Each weekly serving of fish reduced the participants' RA disease activity by a significant 18 percent!

So, during this holiday month, I highly recommend you eat some seafood—even if you don't indulge in the Feast of the Seven Fishes. (Though, perhaps you'd like to give that a try this year, too! See the sidebar for more details.)

And don't forget to supplement with fish oil daily, using my personalized dosage guide.

Finally, if you have a special holiday menu you enjoy preparing, I'd love to hear about it! Leave me a comment on my Facebook page (www.facebook.com/DrMarcMicozzi) or e-mail me at feedback@drmicozzi.com. 

The seven fishes

Each family's traditional Feast of the Seven Fishes varies slightly, but offerings typically include the following fish and shellfish:

- *Baccalà* (codfish)
- Calamari (squid) fried, or in tomato sauce
- Fried smelts
- Mussels marinara
- *Scungilli* (conch)
- Shrimp
- *Spaghetti alle vongole* (spaghetti with clam sauce)
- Stuffed clams

I advise getting your fish and shellfish fresh from the seafood section of your favorite grocer. Or better yet, seek out a fresh seafood market if you live near the coast. As always, opt for wild-caught fish if you can, which has more nutrients than farm-raised fish.

And if making seven different dishes sounds like too much, consider throwing together a few of your favorite types of seafood into one big pot to make one of my favorite meals, a traditional seafood boil.

DISCOVERED: The “Christmas tree secret” for better health

We all know about the holiday tradition of bringing an evergreen tree inside the house. A decorated tree is beautiful—and transports the aroma of Nature right into your living room.

But even if you *don't* bring a live tree into your home, you can still enjoy all the season has to offer—by bathing in Nature's sights and scents with a walk through a forest, or even infusing certain essential oils.

In fact, the essential oils found in fir and pine trees can actually fumigate and sanitize your house. What a great, natural bonus if you have visitors during the holiday season!

So, let's take a closer look at the many health benefits this “Christmas

tree secret” has to offer—and how you can take advantage of them...

The amazing power of airborne fir and pine oils

A recent research review found that **fir and pine essential oils**—like the ones found in your Christmas tree—have antifungal properties.¹ And another recent study from Austria found that fir essential oils can not only remove airborne fungi, but also bacteria.²

The researchers dispersed silver fir essential oil into the air of a 1,227-bed hospital in Austria. Two hours later, bacterial concentrations in the air were reduced by a whopping 40 percent. And the fungi reductions

were even more impressive—up to 60 percent.

Silver fir oil has long been known to have antioxidant properties that neutralize harmful chemicals in the air. Research shows this property helps support the respiratory system—and can even soothe muscles.³

Ways to spruce up your home

Of course, you can breathe in fir and pine essential oils directly from your holiday tree. But there are other options to get the health benefits of these oils. Here are some of my favorites:

Aromatherapy diffusers waft essential oils throughout your

home. One of my favorite holiday essential oil blends includes 10 drops of frankincense oil, 10 drops of cedarwood oil, and 4 drops of fir needle oil.

You can also make your own diffuser by placing drops of essential plant oils into a glass or ceramic vessel that's warmed with a votive candle or a low-wattage lightbulb (this type of diffuser is often sold as a kit).

Wax melts can also be infused with essential oils. In a saucepan, melt natural beeswax. Stir in about 100 drops of essential oil, pour the mixture into a cupcake mold and let cool.

Once solidified, you can then take out the individual wax "cakes," place them in a fireproof, decorative container, and heat them up with a votive candle or 25-watt lightbulb.

Personal care products like organic soaps can contain essential oils from evergreens such as balsam pine, black spruce, and silver fir.

(My daughter uses these natural oils in her "Foggy Morning Pine," "A Walk in the Woods," and "Pine Forest" soaps and other products she sells through her Cozzi Family Farm Co-op Market. You can follow her page on Facebook: www.facebook.com/CozziFamily.)

Cleaning products have long used naturally antibacterial pine oils. But you want to avoid chemical-based concoctions like Pine-Sol® and make your own instead.

Start with a base of water plus white vinegar, add in essential oil(s), and mix thoroughly in a spray bottle. A good ratio is 1 cup of distilled water, 1 cup of white vinegar, 10 drops of essential pine oil, and 10 drops of another natural antibacterial oil like citrus oil or bergamot.

Make tea or infusions. All pine

needles are edible. Black spruce, white fir, and Douglas fir are particularly tasty—and naturally sweet. (Note: There are many other evergreens that aren't edible, so only use members of the pine family.)

You can make pine teas by placing the needles in a tea strainer or infuser, and steeping them for a couple minutes. You'll find that your tea is naturally sweet, without any need for sugar or honey. And you'll be drinking in, as well as breathing in, all of the health benefits of the natural plant oils.

You can also make natural infusions by adding pine needles or small pine branches to alcohol, or to a combination of olive oil and vinegar. Then, the alcohol infusion can be used to create a festive cocktail—and the oil and vinegar infusion can be used for a tasty marinade (see page 6) or salad dressing.

Getting the benefits of pine oil "au naturel"

Of course, the tradition of the Christmas tree (*tannenbaum*) started in central Europe, where evergreens grow high in the Alpine regions.

When Queen Victoria of England married Prince Albert of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha (modern-day Germany) in 1840, he began introducing European traditions such as Christmas trees and gingerbread to England. These traditions quickly spread to the U.S.

Germany was also a center of the "nature cure" tradition in the 1800s, which involved being outside among the trees and water, and breathing in plenty of fresh air. Learning to observe and appreciate the subtle (and not-so-subtle) cues of Nature is good for your health—both mind and body.

As you know, I always recommend getting out in Nature for some

moderate exercise. You can even take advantage of a growing health and meditative practice called forest bathing.

How to immerse yourself in the pines

As I wrote in the March 2020 issue, forest bathing takes immersion in and appreciation of Nature to the next level.

This practice isn't really new...or as risqué as it may sound. It's actually a mindfulness practice that is dated back to 6th century Japan. And most people do it mostly with their clothes on (especially at this time of year!).

In essence, forest bathing consists of ambling through the forest, letting your body and your senses be your guide. The overall goal is to expose your body to the sun, air, and wind...savoring the sights, sounds, smells, and even tastes of your surroundings.

Focusing on the sensations of the forest naturally clears your mind and allows you to be present in the moment. Numerous studies show that forest bathing can lower stress; reduce blood pressure and pulse rate; alleviate depression, anxiety, and fatigue; increase energy; and promote restful sleep.

Research also shows the effects of forest bathing actually help "switch on" your immune system—which is perhaps more important now (in the age of coronavirus) than ever before.⁴ One study found that the essential oils in forest plants (including pines) can help boost your immunity for more than a month!⁵

The bottom line is that whether you commune with pines and firs inside or outside your home, you'll improve your physical and mental health...and your emotional well-being.

Happy holidays! 

Turkey feasts, casseroles, and healthy pies...oh my!

Share family recipes, secrets, and cooking basics with your loved ones this season

'Tis the season for cooking and baking galore—from delicious seafood (see page 1), racks of lamb, and organic turkey, all the way to homemade apple-blueberry pie and cookies.

But no matter what you're cooking up in the kitchen this holiday season, I hope you find yourself surrounded by loved ones. Especially children and grandchildren! And then, I hope you share some of your cooking basics (and secrets!) with one another.

After all, knowing *how* to cook is vital to a healthy life. If you can make your own meals, you can avoid eating packaged, processed “Frankenfoods”. And being proficient at cooking makes it easy—and tasty—to follow a healthy diet every day.

Cooking also gives children (and adults) a better understanding of where their food comes from. It can even help introduce youngsters to diverse foods...and can help take the fear and “yuck” factor out of eating nutritious foods like vegetables. Not to mention, cooking is creative *and* fun!

Of course, I also realize that not everyone is comfortable in the kitchen. So, if you don't know how to cook, or if it has been a while since you've prepared an entire meal (and your skills are rusty), I have some good news...

You can still pass on the joy of cooking to younger generations this holiday season.

How? Well, cooking really isn't difficult. At its most basic, it simply means heating foods. And there basically are only three key ways to do just that: dry heat, moist heat, or a combination.

So, let's start with a primer on the different cooking approaches, and how to accomplish them. Then, I'll share some tips I've learned over the years on engaging children in cooking...

Your cooking glossary

The following cooking techniques use dry heat:

Baking is a big one, especially at this time of year. Baking employs indirect heat applied from all sides in an enclosed space, like an oven. It's similar to roasting (see below), but temperatures are typically lower, and cooking times are shorter.

Most people think baking only involves sweet treats. But you can also bake savory (and healthier) foods. For instance, you can bake whole chickens with vegetables. Baked whole-grain pasta with marinara and full-fat mozzarella is another popular (and easy) dish. And, of course, casseroles and cassoulets are the ultimate savory baked goods. I like to use recipes from www.epicurious.com—search for “savory cooking projects.”

Broiling is when a food is placed directly under a source of dry heat. Most ovens have broiling settings. (You'll want to preheat the broiler.) This technique results in a crunchy,

crispy outer layer on many foods.

Of course, you'll want to make sure your food is at room temperature before broiling. This technique is good for thin cuts of meat or fish (less than 1 ½ inch thick). You can also broil fruits like pineapple or bananas for a unique, healthy dessert.

Grilling is basically the opposite of broiling. Dry heat is applied from a source underneath the food, typically from an open flame. On a self-contained grill, closing the lid will retain heat and allow food temperatures to rise more quickly—resulting in a faster cooking time while preserving the food's moisture and flavor.

Most people think of meat or seafood when grilling, but there are other options. Many fruits and vegetables taste great when grilled. So do avocados and, surprisingly, romaine lettuce, endive, and radicchio. Just make sure to brush fruits and vegetables with a little bit of olive oil or a healthy marinade to keep them from sticking to the grill. (I shared a healthy beer marinade for grilling in the September 2021 issue—be sure to refer back!)

Roasting involves cooking in a closed oven at a high temperature. This approach works well for larger foods like poultry (think Christmas turkey or goose), or cuts of meat (like roasts), that are relatively tender, with internal or surface fats that keep them moist. You can also roast with vegetables to bring out their flavor and moisture.

As with broiling, you'll want to bring foods to room temperature before roasting to ensure a more even cooking. And if you're roasting meat or poultry, use a thermometer to make sure it's cooked to a safe temperature. (Always check guidelines for the specific food. But generally, you'll want to aim for an internal temperature of 165 degrees.)

Sautéing is used to cook foods quickly in a skillet or shallow pan over high heat—usually on a stovetop. You'll need a light coating of oil or full-fat butter on the pan to keep the foods from sticking. Since this cooking method heats foods quickly, they need to be stirred and tossed frequently to avoid burning (sauté means “jump” in French, and the chef makes the contents jump in the pan).

Sautéing is a quick and easy way to prepare tender, small or thin cuts of meat (veal, pork, chicken filets) and fish. It's also excellent for vegetables, particularly the more tender varieties (asparagus, green beans, mushrooms, peppers, squash, and zucchini).

Searing uses similar techniques as sautéing, but with different objectives. Whereas sautéing cooks foods all the way through, searing is used to brown food (usually meat) on all sides, creating a crispy crust. The food is then finished using another technique (typically roasting—see above).

Like sautéing, searing is done in a large flat pan, coated in oil or full-fat butter, at high heat. This technique adds color and flavor while sealing in moisture.

Now, the following cooking techniques use moist heat:

Poaching is a gentle method in which foods are simmered in liquids—usually water, but also broths or

stocks, milk, wine, or vinegar. Poaching preserves the flavor and moisture of the food without the use of butter or oil.

This method uses low, indirect heat (usually a medium-low setting on your stovetop), making it suitable for delicate foods like eggs. But you can also poach chicken, fish, and fruit (fruit is especially tasty when poached in wine).

Poaching can be tricky, though, if you don't know how long to cook the food. Eggs should be poached for two to four minutes, depending on how runny you like them. Fish should flake when done. As for meat and poultry, again, I recommend using a meat thermometer to make sure it's cooked at the right internal temperature.

The following cooking techniques use a combination of dry and moist heat:

Braising and **stewing** are very similar. The main differences are that braising uses larger pieces of meat and vegetables, whereas stewing is for smaller, more uniform cuts. Also, in braising, the foods are only partially covered in liquid, whereas they're completely immersed during stewing.

Both techniques are used to cook foods that aren't naturally tender. This includes the tougher meats (brisket, chuck, oxtail, round, and shank cuts) or firm, fibrous vegetables like cabbage, carrots, celery, eggplant, leeks, or tomatoes. The lower heat and longer cooking times used in braising and stewing preserve the food's flavor and moisture while also tenderizing it.

To braise or stew a food, start by searing it (see the definition above) in a Dutch oven or other heavy-bottomed pot or pan. Then, add liquid

(usually water, but broth or stock is another good choice) and simmer until tender in the Dutch oven or a slow cooker.

And there you have it! Now that you know the cooking basics, you don't have to stew (unless you want to!) over *how* to provide healthy, delicious meals for you and your family. Just heat up the skillet, turn on the oven, or fire up the stovetop or grill and get cooking! Then, when you feel ready, start experimenting with different flavors, too—through a combination of healthy spices or even homemade sauces and marinades.

Four easy ways to get children into the kitchen

Cooking is usually thought of as an adult skill. But teaching children to cook is a great investment in both their health and independence.

Far too often, younger generations spread their wings and fly... only knowing how to power up a microwave (a poor cooking choice under *all* conditions) or boil a cup of noodles (probably the worst food on the planet). But the reality is, by middle school, they should be able to plan and cook meals by themselves from start to finish.

So—let's pledge to do something about it. Start by teaching the youngsters in your life the same cooking basics that I've outlined above. And holiday cooking rituals are a great place to start! (Just don't limit kitchen experiences to decorating Christmas cookies or gingerbread men.)

Then, here are some tips for encouraging them to join you in the kitchen...

1. Ask for help. The secret to the great five-star chefs is their reliance on sous chefs. Young children can

start their cooking careers (and make your job easier) by adding and stirring ingredients into recipes. As they get older, children can learn to chop and dice foods, too. (You'll also want to teach about safe use and sharpening of knives.)

2. Encourage young taste buds.

Children can be surprisingly good taste testers. When I was an aspiring young cook in the kitchen with my mother or grandmother, they never once cracked open a cookbook (except for the occasional baked good, which wasn't really my thing anyway). We all just tasted the food during preparation and decided about adding so much of this or that.

With all due respect to the great Julia Child (and our friend, her niece, Phila Moran), the real art of *Mastering*

the Art of French Cooking was in not needing a cookbook. Enlisting children as taste testers helps them learn about cooking without even knowing they're doing so.


3. Involve kids in meal planning.

Children hear about many different kinds of foods and cuisine through media or friends, and can be curious about trying them out. If you ask them to help plan the week's meals, you may be pleasantly surprised when they bypass the canned, packaged, processed food aisles and opt for more colorful and interesting fresh foods.

You can also encourage this natural curiosity by venturing out to specialty food stores and occasionally trying different kinds of restaurants to expose your children or

grandchildren to novel cuisines (and avoid boring and unhealthy fast-food and chain eateries).

4. Watch cooking shows. Make TV viewing healthy in more ways than one. There are so many cooking shows to choose from these days, and TV chefs tend to be masters at entertainment as well as cooking—which helps keep even younger children engaged.

Cooking shows can introduce children to different foods, kitchen utensils, and meal preparation, as well as food-related terminology. They're also good, wholesome entertainment and education for the whole household. 

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NEWS BRIEF

Yuletide treat boosts your heart and improves digestion

I often write about specific foods from the healthy Mediterranean diet, but there are a few I haven't discussed before...like figs.

So, in honor of the Yuletide season, let's talk about them.

As a child and young man, I picked figs fresh off the trees in southern France and Italy in early fall, and ate the whole fruit right on the spot. Of course, dried figs are also a traditional part of Christmas foods. They're used to make a rich, boiled pudding with flour, suet, and other dried fruit.

This concoction is known as figgy pudding (or, less poetically, plum pudding). In fact, when you hear the strains of "we wish you a Merry Christmas" and the request to "bring us some figgy pudding," that's what they're singing about.

Figgy pudding is thought to have originated in medieval Britain as a way to preserve food for the winter. Along

with dried fruit, the pudding could also contain beef, mutton, wine, and spices. As a soup-like dish, it was served as a fasting meal in preparation for the Christmas season.

The fig tree is also featured in the history of many other cultures. Figs are thought to be among the first cultivated fruit trees in Egypt and Arabia. Buddha is said to have reached enlightenment while sitting under a Bodhi fig tree. In India, the goddess Nirantali is credited with creating tongues for human speech from the vibrating leaves of a fig tree. And ancient Greek and Roman mythology associated figs (and wine) with the god Dionysus/Bacchus.

According to modern science, figs are highly nutritious. They're rich in fiber—and are a good source of vitamins A, B, C, and K. Figs are also loaded with copper and contain significant levels of calcium, iron, magnesium, and potassium.

Because of their high fiber content, some research shows that figs can help

promote healthy digestion and relieve constipation. Plus, they're a prebiotic food—which can also aid in healthy digestion, as prebiotics help to nurture the natural probiotics that keep your gastrointestinal microbiome healthy.

In addition, the potassium in figs may help lower blood pressure and reduce your risk of heart disease. And figs' calcium and potassium have been shown to improve bone density and fight osteoporosis. (I'll report more on bone health in next month's issue.)

So, how can you take the best advantage of this healthy, nutritious fruit?

I personally like to combine fresh or dried fig with walnuts, blueberries, prunes, and cranberries for a flavorful holiday treat. You can also make some homemade figgy pudding, using the cooking techniques I outline on page 6. (There are plenty of festive recipes online.) It's healthier, tastier, and more tender than that infamous fruitcake.