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KAREN COLLINS Promoting Nutrition's Big Picture Through Smart Bytes and Small Changes

By Juliann Schaeffer

Karen Collins, MS, RDN, CDN, FAND, a nutrition consultant, speaker, and writer, has been preaching healthfulness for more than 25 years. In addition to one-on-one counseling through her long-time western New York private practice as well as nationwide presentations, she espouses her messages through her blog, *Smart Bytes* (<http://karencollinsnutrition.com>).

With a trademarked tagline of “taking nutrition from daunting to doable,” Collins works to dig past the superficial healthy headlines that bombard (and confuse) consumers daily to determine what the latest research really says about how food can help people become healthier and happier. And, according to Collins, that usually means small changes.

“I think we need to help people identify the priority changes for them and then find and see the value in small steps they can take,” she says. “People are bombarded with messages that can make them feel perfection is needed in order to make a difference, and that’s not what research shows.”

According to Collins, those small changes could provide even bigger dividends if people spent more time in the kitchen. “I think we need to help people get more comfortable cooking at home, mindfully enjoying food prepared with fresh

flavors, instead of thinking that either eating out or using highly processed foods are the only options when they feel rushed,” she says.

One of Collins’ specialties is cancer prevention, and she lends her nutritional expertise to the American Institute for Cancer Research (AICR) as a nutrition advisor. She’s also the author of a weekly syndicated column for the AICR called “Health Talk” and coauthor of the “Nutrition and Cancer Prevention” chapter in the third edition of *The Clinical Guide to Oncology Nutrition*, published by the Oncology Nutrition Dietetic Practice Group of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics (the Academy). Deeply involved in numerous Academy dietetic practice groups, she serves as codirector of the Sports, Cardiovascular, and Wellness Nutrition (SCAN) Dietetic Practice Group’s Wellness and Cardiovascular subunit.

With her hand in so many pots, so to speak, Collins’ day could have her focusing on any number of nutrition-related tasks: a webinar presentation, a blog posting, or content review for the AICR. “I try to start the day focused on whatever project demands the most intense and creative thinking,” she says, admitting that in addition to numerous administrative tasks, self-employment definitely has its perks. “One great thing about being self-employed is that I can take time out to refresh with midday physical activity, like a tae kwon do class or a quick walk.”

Plus, Collins says, the greatest perks of working in the nutrition field are definitely the excitement of keeping up with constantly changing research and the satisfaction that comes from passing that knowledge on to people so they can better their lives.

Today’s Dietitian (TD): What is your proudest career accomplishment?

Collins: I feel incredibly lucky with the opportunities I’ve had for work, through which I hope to make a difference. I feel both honored and humbled to have had the chance to contribute in various ways to the AICR’s important work. Receiving the SCAN Dietetic Practice Group award for Excellence in Practice in Wellness Nutrition certainly means a tremendous amount to me. Honestly, though, during many years in private practice, it’s been a true privilege helping individuals create healthier lifestyles and seeing the impact in their lives, and I value that part of my career, too.

TD: You’ve written a great deal about how heart disease, diabetes, and cancer are interrelated. What are the most important points nutrition professionals should know about this topic?

Collins: When I speak about this at health professional conferences, people often comment about problems of today’s specialization “silos.” We need to recognize the significant overlap between diabetes, heart disease, and cancer. We can

promote choices for overall health, even when we temporarily focus on one particular problem. Fortunately, eating patterns focused on vegetables, fruits, whole grains, and beans and supporting a healthy weight offer the potential to protect against all three diseases. And no single eating pattern is essential to achieve this. In fact, that's the subject of a health professionals webinar I did with Sharon Palmer, RD, which is offered for free on the AICR website. (For more information on the webinar, visit www.aicr.org/health-professionals/ce/webinars/eating-patterns-to-lower-cancer-risk.html.)

TD: From the many nutrition and health conferences and seminars you've presented, what's one insight, either from a copresenter or from an audience member, that struck you or has stuck with you, and why?

Collins: A big take-home lesson for me from health professional and consumer audiences is how easy it is for people to get overwhelmed by the constant barrage of headlines about new research findings. Studies are not all equal, and it's important that when sharing messages about healthful eating, we base them on the big picture of overall research. People need help setting priorities for choices backed by strong evidence as most likely to make a difference. In fact, that was the inspiration behind creating my *Smart Bytes* blog, which focuses on putting research in perspective and making choices based on it doable.

TD: Give us a peek inside your refrigerator or cupboard. What are the mainstays always in your kitchen, and what seasonal foods do you most look forward to stocking them with in the summer?

Collins: I love the arrival of summer and all its fresh vegetables and fruits! I look forward to all the tomatoes, peppers, corn on the cob, and fresh greens and to the raspberry and blueberry seasons.

Still, I keep my freezer and pantry stocked all year round so I always have the essentials on hand. My freezer is always loaded with bags of vegetables like chopped spinach, artichoke hearts, and squash plus lots of frozen berries and peaches. My pantry always has tomatoes because they're the foundation of so many dishes I make. Other essentials are canned black, kidney, and garbanzo beans; dried lentils; and whole grains such as quinoa and whole wheat couscous and pasta. Because I add nuts to so many salads and other dishes, I always keep a stash. And I count on knowing I've always got a wide variety of herbs, spices, and flavored vinegars handy.

TD: Is it true that you have a purple belt in tae kwon do, and what led you to this discipline?

Collins: Yes, although I'm not someone that most people would expect to love something like tae kwon do, and it was never something I'd even considered. An instructor in an aerobics-type kickboxing class suggested I give it a try. To my surprise, I

loved it from the start. It's a fabulous way to exercise both body and mind. And since you can't focus on anything else while you're doing tae kwon do, it's a terrific emotional refresher and stress buster.

TD: How has tae kwon do helped mold your nutrition philosophy?

Collins: It has shaped the way I communicate messages about nutrition. The first time I was being tested to progress to a new belt, I passed everything else, but when I tried to break my board, I just couldn't. My instructor said, "You're seeing the board as a barrier and letting it stop you. You have to look beyond the board and kick through it." He was right: I changed perspective, and I broke the board. Instantly, I saw it as a metaphor for all the walls my clients were seeing. I want to be the voice reminding people that even when we see barriers, that doesn't mean we can't break through.

TD: What's a great summer vegetable dish to serve a crowd?

Collins: I always aim to offer a variety of vegetables that taste so good that they're the highlight of a meal. The taste of fresh summer vegetables is so wonderful, I don't like to do anything that masks it. Instead, I just aim for an interesting color and flavor combination from the choices that look good when I'm shopping and add in a substantial dose of a fresh herb like basil or cilantro. I love flavored vinegars, but sometimes a simple olive oil and lemon dressing is the refreshing note that ties everything together and lets the flavors of the vegetables stand out. I do love to grill vegetables, too. It's funny, but it's those simple combinations that people get all excited about when we entertain.

TD: What about a refreshing summer fruit dessert recipe?

Collins: That's easy: wash and enjoy! Summer peaches are great grilled, too.

TD: Favorite place or way to relax and unwind?

Collins: My favorite ways to unwind are to spend time with family or girlfriends and to be outside in fresh air. My husband and I are empty nesters now, so time with our sons is truly precious—and we really have fun together. Time talking with sisters and girlfriends who "get" you is truly a gift. And being outside revives me on every level. There's the peace of mind from quietly walking my dog or sitting near water, or the exhilaration of cross-country skiing or doing an interval walk-run. I believe in outdoor playtime, too. I love to pull out croquet or bocce when friends come over in the summer instead of just sitting around.

— Juliann Schaeffer is a freelance writer and editor based in Alburtis, Pennsylvania, and a frequent contributor to *Today's Dietitian*.