



DO YOUR PART FOR THE PLANET

Simple Earth Day Action Steps

By Densie Webb, PhD, RD

For more than 40 years, Americans have celebrated Earth Day on April 22 in an effort to promote a cleaner, more healthful environment for current and future generations. Schools, businesses, and government agencies use the day to get involved in promoting greener ways to live. The campaign for Earth Day 2011 is organized around A Billion Acts of Green, a program designed to inspire and reward both simple individual acts and larger organizational initiatives that further the goals of reducing carbon emissions and supporting sustainability on the planet.

The three Rs of a sustainable lifestyle are reduce, reuse, and recycle. Those tenets can be put into practice in myriad ways. Although much of the talk about sustainability seems to focus more on the work of environmentalists than dietitians, there are many steps RDs can take and pass on to their patients and clients to help keep our water pure and improve the air we breathe.

Earth-friendly food tips don't always have to be about organic food (though that's part of the big picture). The ways in which all food is packaged, shipped, prepared, and served are

just as important and as relevant for dietitians to know about when trying to incorporate environmentally friendly principles into their counseling and their own lives.

Earth Day Big Four

The following are four Earth Day tips you can pass on to patients and clients:

- **Eat organic.** Choosing USDA-certified organic foods reduces pollution in the air, soil, and water by ensuring reduced use of pesticides.
- **Eat locally.** It's the next best thing to growing your own. Buying foods grown close to home by local farmers helps reduce greenhouse gas emissions. One study published in *Environmental Science and Technology* found that if the typical American family purchased local foods, greenhouse gas emissions could be reduced by as much as 5% as a result of fewer emissions from production and transportation.
- **Eat fewer processed foods.** In addition to creating more unnecessary packaging that pollutes, the processing and transportation of packaged foods is much more energy and resource intensive than buying fresh ingredients and cooking from scratch.

- **Eat lower on the food chain.** That means working toward a plant-based diet. Diane Welland, MS, RD, author of *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Eating Clean*, suggests eating at least one vegetarian meal per week. According to the National Resources Defense Council, if all Americans eliminated just one 4-oz serving of beef per week, the reduction in global warming would be equivalent to taking 4 million to 6 million cars off the road.

It Doesn't Stop There

The following are more ways to incorporate Earth-friendly methods into your life and your practice:

- Kathy Nichols, RD, a California-based certified life coach, recommends joining a community-supported agriculture (CSA) group and shopping at local farmers' markets. To find a CSA near you, visit www.nal.usda.gov/afsic/pubs/csa/csa.shtml.
- Nichols also suggests skipping plastic water bottles and opting for reusable ones. There are several good metal ones and some BPA-free plastic ones from which to choose. The Good Housekeeping Research Institute has created a list of the top 22 reusable water bottles. You can get a good-quality reusable water bottle for about \$15 to \$20.
- Bringing your lunch to work is always a good idea, but skip the brown bag and try a reusable lunch bag. Nutrition expert Susan Mitchell, PhD, RD, suggests some of the colorful options available from www.reuseit.com for about \$10 to \$20.

• Cut more, cook less, says Jackie Newgent, RD, a culinary nutritionist and author of the *Big Green Cookbook*. Smaller foods cook faster, which means you'll use less energy. Honing your knife skills is part of this low-carbon cooking technique.

• Newgent also offers a suggestion for being a greener baker. She says when you're baking, don't be tempted to constantly open the oven to check on a dish's progress. Every time you open a hot oven, it may lose 25°F to 50°F. That means you'll need to use more energy for reheating and possibly more energy to cool down the kitchen.

• Be an "ecotarian," says Newgent—that's someone who eats foods based on their environmental sustainability. Newgent, who counts herself as one, defines an ecotarian as someone who eats a mainly plant-based diet that may contain small amounts of organic animal products.

• The Environmental Protection Agency suggests keeping reusable shopping bags on your car seat or hanging them by the door so they're easy to grab. Fewer plastic bags means less pollution.

• Grow your own. Gardening and harvesting your own vegetables, herbs, and spices translates into reduced fuel usage for transportation and fewer carbon emissions.

• Minimize waste. Buying only what you need or what you will freeze or store for later use reduces landfill garbage and carbon dioxide produced from decomposing foods, says Welland.

• Compost. Food scraps and kitchen waste make good compost, which improves soil so it holds more water, allowing plants to grow better. Good for your garden, good for the earth.

• Instead of plastic sandwich bags, choose reusable sandwich and snack bags. They come in a variety of colors and designs and are available at www.shopwastenotsaks.com for \$7.50 each.

• Opt for eco-friendly certified organic wines. They're made with

organic grapes and bottled in a certified organic facility. They are also made without the addition of sulfites as a preservative. Because of that, smaller stores with low turnover are less likely to carry them. If you can't find organic wine, opt for one that is produced locally or, at the very least, domestically.

• Choose to dine at green restaurants when you can. Check with the Green Restaurant Association (GRA) to see whether any in your area are listed as green-certified restaurants. To be certified, a restaurant must meet standards for water efficiency, waste reduction and recycling, sustainable furnishings and building materials, sustainable food, energy use, use of disposables, and chemical and pollution reduction. If you have a favorite restaurant that you would like to help go green, the GRA's website offers suggestion cards that can be printed and mailed or left on the table with the bill along with a message encouraging the establishment to contact the GRA and get green.

• Want to buy a grill? Consider one powered by propane rather than charcoal. A study published in *Environmental Impact Assessment Review* found that propane has a carbon footprint that is almost two thirds less than charcoal's.

It's the Thought, Not the Method, That Counts

Whether you're thinking of passing on the big four eco-friendly steps to your clients and patients or implementing one or two of the smaller suggestions yourself, you'll be celebrating Earth Day the way it was intended—making changes that sustain the Earth and its resources.

For more information on Earth Day 2011 and A Billion Acts of Green, visit www.earthday.org.

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Reference:

1. Ranganathan N, Ranganathan P, Friedman EA, et al. *Adv Ther.* 2010;27(9):634–647.

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