Whole Foods Market: "Health Starts Here"

Jennifer L. Nelson

The sheer number of choices in a supermarket can be overwhelming, and consumers are often hard-pressed to resist quick and easy convenience foods and frozen meals. Add to the mix the fact that many Americans are unclear about exactly what they should be eating—and how much—for proper nutrition, and you really have a recipe for disaster.

That's why Whole Foods Market rolled out its Health Starts Here program. With 11 locations scattered throughout the Garden State, the natural and organic chain has always been committed to high-quality standards and sustainable agriculture, but now the company has taken on its biggest mission yet: helping customers achieve lifelong health.

"The company started 30 years ago when people did a lot of cooking, and we want to help our customers go back to basics," explains Mark Wilkins, associate coordinator for Health Starts Here.

"The acronym for 'standard American diet' spells 'sad,' and the state of health in this country is just that," adds Kristine Nicholson, healthy-eating specialist at the Millburn-Union location. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' *Healthy People 2010* data, only about 38 percent of Americans eat enough fruit, and just six percent of men and four percent of women consume an adequate amount of vegetables.

"Someone has to do something," Nicholson says, "and if not Whole Foods Market, then who?"

Countless studies prove that a diet rich in vegetables, beans, fruits, whole grains, nuts and seeds promotes good health and reduces the risk of chronic disease. Health Starts Here makes the research digestible with a program revolving around just four key pillars of healthy eating: choosing whole, natural, and organic foods; maintaining a plant-based diet including legumes, nuts, and seeds; consuming healthy fats from plant sources like nuts and avocados; and opting for nutrient-dense foods that are low in calories but high in micronutrients such as vitamins, minerals and antioxidants.

"We're not telling people to eat salad all day; we're just asking that they consume more plant-based foods, and smaller portions of everything else," Nicholson says.

To help consumers get even more bang for their nutrition buck, the company partnered with Eat Right America to label many foods sold in the market according to an Aggregate Nutrient Density Index (ANDI) score, which indicates the food's nutrient density on a scale of 1 to 1000; dark leafy greens like kale earn the highest score, while soda scores a one.

Backed by a medical advisory board, the retailer also offers a variety of free cooking classes along with healthy-eating supper clubs for a modest fee. Currently, four New Jersey locations are home to healthy-eating specialists who are on hand to answer questions and help customers identify the best items to toss into their shopping carts.

"We teach people how to shop for good health. Health Starts Here is truly a lifestyle," says Tyrone J. Walcott, healthy-eating specialist at the West Orange and Montclair locations.

Customers also have access to hundreds of online recipes, and they can stop by the market's Healthy Eating Kiosk for in-store information sessions, book-club meetings, store tours, customized healthy-eating programs, and individual consultations at no additional charge.

"We're hoping to help demystify healthy eating," Wilkins says. "The best part about the program is turning people on to some really great food . . . and inspiring them to get back into the kitchen."

Jennifer L. Nelson is a New Jersey-based freelance writer specializing in health, parenting and lifestyle. Visit her website: JenniferLNelson.com.