Since 1973, the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics has encouraged people to make informed food choices and develop sound eating and physical activity habits. What started as National Nutrition Week 47 years ago became a month-long celebration in March 1980. For National Nutrition Month® in March 2020, the theme is Eat Right, Bite by Bite, and promotes eating a variety of nutritious foods every day.

Each March, the Academy focuses on healthy eating all month long, said Janice Hermann, Oklahoma State University Extension nutrition specialist.

“National Nutrition Month is a great time to focus on healthy eating, and it’s something we should continue all year long,” Hermann said. “We know what an important role fruits and vegetables play in a healthy diet. You can build a healthy plate by making half of your plate fruits and vegetables. It’s also a great way to add vibrant color, flavor and texture, not to mention the vitamins, minerals and dietary fiber.”

A goal to strive for is to consume 2 cups of fruits and 2 ½ cups of vegetables every day. While that might sound like a lot, it really can be quite simple.

Hermann suggests starting your day with a breakfast smoothie made with low-fat milk or yogurt. Add frozen strawberries and a banana and you are well on your way to meeting that goal. Dress up a bowl of oatmeal with blueberries, raspberries or strawberries.

“As the weather begins to warm up and you start barbecuing, grill some colorful vegetable kabobs packed with tomatoes, colored bell peppers, zucchini and mushrooms,” she said. “Instead of snacking on chips, satisfy your need for crunch with baby carrots, celery and other crispy veggies. Use your favorite low-fat salad dressing for dipping.”

A turkey sandwich is a quick and easy lunch, but you can kick it up a notch with sliced tomatoes, lettuce, cucumber slices or even bell pepper strips. If you want cheese, add a slice in a low-fat variety.

For a quick and easy side dish, keep your freezer stocked with frozen vegetables. These easily can be steamed or microwaved.

Cut fruits and vegetables are a great addition to your child’s lunchbox or to take to the office for a quick and healthy afternoon snack. Broccoli or cauliflower florets, snap peas, baby carrots, cucumbers, bell pepper strips and radishes are some great go-to choices. They also work well if you need a little snack when fixing dinner.

“You’ll find your family is likely to consume more fruits if they are easy to grab. Keep a bowl of fresh fruit such as apples, bananas and oranges on the kitchen counter or table,” Hermann said. “Wash and store grapes or strawberries in single-serve containers in the refrigerator.”

Remember those vegetable kabobs that were mentioned earlier? Try fruit kabobs on the grill using pineapple, peaches and bananas. Grill on low heat until the fruit is hot and slightly golden. Another idea to increase fruit consumption is to puree apples, berries, peaches or pears and use this on pancakes, waffles or French toast. This sweet sauce also can be used on grilled or broiled seafood or poultry. Stuff an omelet with vegetables. You easily can turn an omelet into a heart healthy and satisfying meal by adding broccoli, squash, carrots, peppers, tomatoes and onions, along with some low-fat cheese.

If you have picky eaters in your home, it is easy to hide some vegetables in other foods. Add grated, shredded or chopped vegetables such as zucchini, spinach and carrots to lasagna, meat loaf, pasta sauce, pizza and even rice dishes. They will never know the difference.

For those who like dessert after a meal, consider slicing a banana lengthwise and topping it with frozen yogurt for a tasty, yet healthy treat.

“It really can be easy to get the recommended amount of fruits and vegetables on a daily basis. Take some time this month to develop a plan and incorporate it into your family’s mealtimes,” Hermann said.