

This health thing is tough

But we're making progress as a family



The Harrels and the families of four readers have pledged to live healthier lives this year as part of the Southwest Florida Parent & Child Family Health Challenge:

By Erin Harrel

I have to admit I went into the Family Health Challenge a little skeptical. When you're my size, visiting a fitness facility can be a bit intimidating (for some crazy reason I thought I might be the only one in there packing on a few extra pounds — to my surprise, I wasn't alone).

The family fitness challenge has proven to be a very educational and exhilarating experience.

Our first appointment at The Omni Fitness Club was with Robert Burrough, supervised exercise program director. What an enlightening experience! Robert did a series of tests for each of us regarding weight, body fat analysis and endurance. GAG! At the very young age of 35, I was told I had the body of a 41-year-old. In an effort to maintain a little dignity, I won't share the rest of my results. I'll only tell you, they weren't good (my husband fared much better). I was so impressed with his knowledge of the body and nutrition. He had an answer for every question we threw at him.

For example, I asked if I should be eating before my morning training sessions or after. Before, he said, and gave me an entire litany on what I



The Harrel family: Greg and Erin with their children, from left to right, Riley, 6, Maggie, 3, and Jude, 8.
Photo by Garth Francis

should eat and why. He suggested a light meal of mostly protein. He instructed us to look for protein bars (ranging from 130 to 150 calories for me and under 250 calories for my husband) for the mornings we don't have time to prepare whole foods.

Robert really sealed the deal for us when he told us to exclude the word "DIET" from our vocabulary. He suggested we focus on creating healthy lifestyle changes throughout the course of the year rather than trying to follow some faddy diet.

Next we visited with the Lee Health Solutions nutritionist at Cape Coral Hospital. Again, this proved to be very enlightening. I really thought my family and I were on the right track with nutrition. My husband and I try to prepare a veggie every night with dinner and pack fruit with the kids' lunches every day.

We found out that we really needed to be packing in more fruits and veggies and including more fiber in our diets. The dietitian explained that 5 to 7 servings of veggies ➤➤ Page 27

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a day did not mean that we need to eat vegetables seven times a day. She explained that one serving of vegetables is only a half cup. For example, if we had a salad and ate 2 cups of greens, that counted as four servings.

That wasn't the only epiphany that night. The hospital's Darina Neel and Elizabeth McCormick shared with us some healthy snack ideas: kasha granola bars, a small handful of nuts, or dried fruit. They asked us to reflect on how we used to eat in the United States; our diets used to be packed with whole grains, fresh fruits, vegetables, meat, chicken and fish. She suggested we go back to the way we used to eat — limit preservatives and packaged foods.

One of the most exciting parts of our family visit to the nutrition center was that the kids were able to listen and learn the importance of making healthy choices. Just as it is difficult for adults to make healthy choices, children need guidance.

The nutrition center provided each family with a pediatric health plan. The plan contains a section on healthy habits where the kids can choose the foods they want to eat from three columns. Each column is labeled with a different traffic signal: The green light lists foods that kids can eat any time. The yellow light sends out a caution signal including foods that kids should eat only occasionally. The red light suggests food that should only be consumed once in a great while.

My kids immediately began looking for their food favorites. My son found his favorite morning breakfast, waffles, in the caution zone. However, if he chose to eat "whole grain" waffles they were in the green column. He was willing to make the switch just to stay in the green column.

Next month, I'll share some healthy meal ideas I've learned about. 

— Erin Harrel lives in Cape Coral with her husband and three children.

NUTRITION TIP:

To ensure your child will eat healthfully and try new foods, have your child help plan the week's menu and shop for groceries. Being involved in an adult activity will give your child self-esteem. Being part of the planning will allow him to feel in control of his diet, says Elizabeth McCormick, registered dietitian at Lee Health Solutions, a part of Lee Memorial Health System.

Grocery shopping is an excellent time to have your child participate in choosing healthy food and learn about nutrition at the same time.

A lot of the foods marketed toward children are located at their eye level on the shelves. If your child chooses an unhealthy cereal, pick out two healthier ones and have him choose between them. This still allows the child to feel in control of food choices. Participation is key for your child to learn about nutrition and to start making healthy choices at an early age.