

Diabetes: A Family Matter Pot Luck Dinner

Overview:

Pot luck dinners are common in the Appalachian region. Other names for this event are things like carry-in, covered dish supper, pitch-in, or bring-a-plate. The word potluck is of English origin and likely means food given to guests or whatever is left in the pot! Today's potlucks can certainly be things leftover or those things that just happen to be available in the refrigerator or cabinets. However, many take great pains to prepare special dishes for the potluck events as they want to share the best recipe possible. Generally, foods available at a potluck dinner are high in sugar and carbohydrate content. Often a good selection of fruits and green and yellow vegetables is missing. However, the dessert table is often the crowning glory with many folks making more than a single trip to try many of the delicious items available.



The sharing of food is closely tied to Appalachia, a place where food is used to demonstrate care, generosity, and is a vital part of social interactions. Many churches and many other groups in the Appalachian region often enjoy these shared meals where everyone comes together. Each person or family brings a covered dish or a

prepared item large enough to serve many people. While some groups try to do a bit of organization to be sure that the meal is somewhat balanced, many merely take a chance and trust it will all work out well. When the group joins together to share the meal, it is a time that most enjoy! Many groups also create cookbooks to sell locally as a fundraiser that include dishes for these potluck dinners.

It is interesting to note that while many groups have are likely to have at least some members with diabetes and others at risk for the disease, most may not think about the needs of these members when a potluck dinner is planned. Those with diabetes or other chronic illnesses seldom talk with others about their special health care needs. Some are embarrassed and others just do not want others to pay special notice to them.

Group members often talk to one another about those among them that are sick, suffering from disease, and have died. However, talk less often turns to issues like health promotion or disease prevention. Many churches have times when members ask for prayer for those that are ill or have some troubling disease. Group members often visit the sick at the hospital, in nursing homes, and at their homes. In fact, groups of caring persons in the region often organize to cook meals for families or provide other helpful means of support. It is obvious that many living in Appalachia care deeply about their neighbors and friends during times of illness.

Across Appalachia, it is possible that some people are giving little attention to special dietary needs of some group members. Even though we have a national concern about the high risks linked with being overweight, obese, and inactive, many groups of people that truly care about each other fail to address these concerns. Certainly no one intends to be unkind; it is just that people do not often naturally think to address these kinds of needs! As a result, most potluck meals give little consideration to special dietary needs and those attending the potluck dinners often have a difficult time choosing healthy foods. Some just know it is one of the times they will take a 'vacation' from their usual meal patters. Others just "pig out" and eat whatever is there without restraint and sometimes suffer the consequences!

The main purpose for this activity is to raise awareness about healthy eating and special dietary needs of those with diabetes and other illnesses or diseases. Few efforts are made by most groups to educate members about lifestyle choices, healthy eating, special dietary needs, portion sizes, or needs for physical activity. Yet, it is likely that at least some members either have these needs or are at risk for conditions where things could become a problem in the future.

Objectives:

1. Pot luck dinners become a way to educate group members about healthy eating.
2. Pot luck dinners become a means to learn about diabetes prevention and self-management.

3. Pot luck dinners become a way to promote health among group members.

Participants:

The participants at the potluck dinners are generally the group members and perhaps their invited guests. However, to do this activity, a committee or task force needs to be formed within the group to help with planning and implementing events. Volunteer *SUGAR Helpers* can serve as leaders in organizing these events.

Costs:

It is unlikely that any large costs would normally be linked with this activity. While it is possible that a group might choose to give group members some educational materials many can be obtained freely from online or other sources.



Activity:

Groups are made up of members that care about one another! Caring groups are excellent places to share information about ways to support each other. Members can join together as they focus on ways to improve their health. Some groups may have missions that are closely linked with health, but never really consider all of these connections. For example, church groups are concerned about spiritual health, but many members likely think that spirituality has links to emotional and physical health. Other groups might be concerned about

social issues or actually do activities that address some health aspects.

In the Appalachian region, we find greater numbers of people sick with many illnesses and diseases than in some other parts of the nation. Many of these conditions are preventable! While not everything can be prevented forever, the onset of many things can be delayed for years if we live physically active lives and eat healthy foods. Many people in Appalachia do not think that much can be done about your health, but that is not true! We can take control of the things that we do each day. If we choose healthy actions, then we can become healthier. Even small changes in our habits can make big differences.

Caring groups can find ways to help one another get healthy and stay healthy. Members can learn more about diseases like diabetes and find ways to prevent it. They can learn about self-management of diabetes and help others prevent serious problems like blindness, kidney disease, heart trouble, or losing a foot or leg. Groups can show they care for one another by making their concerns about diabetes and its prevention and management more visible. They can learn together and find the best ways to support each other.

You might be asking yourself, what does all of this have to do with potluck dinners? Well, these dinners provide a time when we can show our care and consideration of those that might have special dietary needs. In fact, it might actually go much deeper than that! A group can actually begin to work together to learn about healthy lifestyles and model these behaviors for children and youth. Re-thinking the potluck

dinner is just one way to get across a message that everyone needs to think more about healthy eating. Now, keep in mind that no one wants to get rid of these wonderful times of sharing friendship, fun, stories, and laughter.

So what can you do? Well, one think not to do is to make a big deal out of things at the time of the dinner. That is likely to upset some, embarrass others, and likely make a few just plain mad! Nevertheless, many things can be done at other times that not only impact what takes place at the potluck dinners, but also influence the health of all.

First, consider ways you can educate yourselves about healthy lifestyles. Do some reading. Ask some questions. Learn everything you can. Ask for help. When you have a plan for your health, even if it is not a very big plan yet, share your ideas with a few others in your group. It always takes a spark to get a fire going and you can be that spark!

Now, not everyone is going to want to join in immediately! That is just fine. Maybe you will only be able to find a few people interested in listening to your ideas. Even a small sub-group of 2 or 3 persons can begin talking together and find ways to address personal health needs. Things should always begin with us trying to do some good things for ourselves. Maybe later others will also become interested. Most people are apt to be concerned about health and illness prevention, it is just not a topic talked about much. We do not talk about these things because most of us have tried to change some habits and failed. In fact, we may have tried many times and are even ashamed about the physical condition

we have allowed ourselves to get in. Many of us need some support from friends, family, and caring others willing to encourage us. Make a pact with a small group to support one another and make the changes you want to make is a great beginning.

Once you have made a pact or contract with a few others, then you need a plan! The plan needs to first be about the things you will do to get healthier. The changes will not happen in a week. In fact, they may not even be noticeable in a month. But more than likely, by the end of the second month people are going to be noticing things about you and making positive comments. This is the time that you can begin to talk more about health concerns and encourage others to join you.

While you and a small group is focusing on your personal health, other things can also happen. For example, you can suggest that a special speaker come and share some things with the group about healthy lifestyles and prevention. You might ask a diabetes educator to give a talk about diabetes. A speaker from your local Cooperative Extension Agency may be able to talk with you about topics like nutrition, reading labels, and special diets. You might even get someone to do a cooking demonstration. If you are a volunteer *SUGAR Helper* or know one in your community form a local *Diabetes: A Family Matter* program, you can ask them to share some materials with the group about diabetes. They can help with some ideas for healthy activities for your group to work on.

It is important to keep in mind that change comes slowly for many of us, but it does

come! Those of us that eat too often at buffets and potluck dinners are likely to be overweight and even obese. In addition, those of us that live in rural places seldom get enough activity because we are always in our cars instead of walking. Being overweight and inactive not only puts us at risk for diabetes, but other diseases like heart disease and cancer.

This gets us back to the potluck dinners again! As your group becomes more aware of needs for healthy eating and special diets for those with diabetes or other illnesses, you can suggest that members focus on good nutrition when planning what they will bring. Challenge members to prepare fresh salads, fruits and vegetables in their dishes. Remind them to consider things like sugar and salt content and remind them that those delicious gravies and cream sauces are often way too high in fat content. You could even give everyone with some healthful hints for preparing some sugar free desserts. Use regular size dinner plates rather than the large sectioned trays. Sprinkle everything with good humor and never preach or judge! Most of us can get quite defensive when it comes to what we eat. If we work together, we can see that we all live long healthy lives.

Of course, if you really want to become popular with your group, then suggest that you all take a small hike around a few blocks once dinner is over!

Materials Needed:

No specific materials are needed for this activity. Once your group decides some directions they would like to pursue, a variety of resources are likely available free through the internet. Be sure to check the

resource links on the *Diabetes: A Family Matter* program for some places to begin.

Ways to Extend the Activity:

A good way to extend this activity is to think about forming a permanent sub-group or taskforce that addresses the health needs of your larger group. People in the Appalachian region must find ways to help each other address health and prevention. Going to the doctor for a physical exam is not enough. We have to do more to focus on the ways we are treating our bodies. No one is going to help us if we do not start helping ourselves. BUT, we can help one another! Small groups can start working together and taking actions that directly affects them and members of their families. Many ideas for activities that can be done in your community to address health and focus on prevention can be found on the *Diabetes: A Family Matter* website <www.diabetesfamily.net> under *Toolkit Activities*. Take a look and see if you can find some useful things.

Also, you might want to consider a program like Parish Nursing for your church group or other group as well. This is one way to make an on-going difference in the health of your members. Take a look on the internet and learn some more about this growing idea. Do you have someone in the group that is a nurse or a retired nurse? They may be interested in starting a Parish Nurse program. While these programs have mainly been in churches, there is no reason that other groups could not also have a program such as this. Even if you are not a church, this is still something you can do. The word *parish* comes from a root word that means “to walk beside.” Thus the nurse walks beside and supports the

members of a church or other group to assist them to better care for their health. See the resources down below for some internet links where you can learn more.

Final Word:

If your group completes some activities related to **potluck dinners** or another health activity, please be sure to go to the *Diabetes: A Family Matter* website <www.diabetesfamily.net> and share with others what worked and what did not work. A place on the **Communicate** Section of the website will be available for sharing your ideas. Others will be interested in learning about what you have done and what the outcomes were. If you have a website, please be sure to post the link so that others can take a look.

Resources:

International Parish Nurse Resource center
<http://www.parishnurses.org/>

Are you a pastor, looking for a way to strengthen the healing ministries of your congregation? Are you a registered nurse, looking for a way to integrate healing of body, mind, spirit, and community into your nursing practice? Are you a faith community leader, looking for a way to get involved in an exciting new outreach to members and neighbors? Then we invite you to take a closer look at parish nursing.

National Health ministries

<http://www.pcusa.org/nationalhealth/parishnursing/>

This is a good place to learn more about parish nursing and obtain some resources to get you started in creating a local group program.

Parish Nurse Institute

<http://parishnursing.communityhealthministry.net/>

A parish nurse is a registered nurse who recognizes that spiritual care is central to the practice and facilitates holistic health across the age span of a congregation. As a result, the faith community once again reclaims its healing role in the community by integrating the standards of health within the context of faith. Many parish nurses are BSN prepared and have current experience in the nursing process.