

It's something different for everyone. For Charlene Williams it's a bag of pretzels or a can of Chef Boyardee Beefaroni®. For Jennifer Hardesty it's Twizzlers® and milk shakes or chocolate with potato chips. It is comfort food, and indulging too much can be a roadblock to a healthy diet. **by kelly burgess**



Health-conscious cookbooks help guide you to comforting, yet healthy meals.

# comfort, not calories

## Removing weight-loss roadblocks



At the times you just have to have your comfort food, eat in moderation.

Food is ingrained in our culture and family history. Special foods are part of our celebrations from birthdays to holidays to sports events. We come to identify food with safety, security, comfort and happiness. Virtually everyone has those days when they wish Mom was waiting at home with a steaming mug of hot chocolate and a couple of pieces of cinnamon toast while the smell of meatloaf wafts through the warm kitchen.

The trick is not to reject comfort foods, but to learn to eat in a more healthful manner. Whether it's by portion control, food substitution or other types of substitutions, comfort eating definitely can be part of a healthful diet.

### Identifying comfort eating

Hardesty, of Metairie, La., has only 7 pounds to go before she reaches her goal of losing 54 pounds. She's also lowered her blood pressure and improved her overall health in a number of measurable ways. Part of that is the Weight Watchers program she's been on, which emphasizes portion size, but part of it is the research she's done on nutrition and health during the past year that has made her look at food in a different way. "I learned some strategies from Weight Watchers, but >

I developed this new attitude myself," says Hardesty. "Now, if it's not good for me, I don't even put it in my mouth. I don't want to do that to my body."

Developing that attitude has caused her to start making different food choices, such as substituting popcorn for the several bags of Doritos® she used to consume in a week. To give the popcorn a little kick, she buys seasonings, like white cheddar, to sprinkle on.

Lynn Laboranti, a registered dietician and continuing education specialist for Nature Made, says becoming aware of comfort eating, as Hardesty has, is the first step in learning how to get the "comfort" from food without the calories.

"It's difficult to look at yourself and realize you're eating for comfort," says Laboranti. "The problem with comfort food is not that it's bad, but that it's so hard to control the portions when you have such a connection to the food. This is when food substitutions can be a real benefit."

Other ways to eat food for comfort without over indulging are to follow the "one bite" rule where you limit yourself to one bite of the chosen food and try to savor it. Another way is to strictly control portion sizes. For example, Williams, from Phoenix, still eats pretzels when she's stressed, but now instead of just grabbing the bag and digging

in, she measures out one ounce of pretzels, puts the bag away, and then slowly eats the pretzels. If she still "needs" pretzels, she just repeats the sequence.

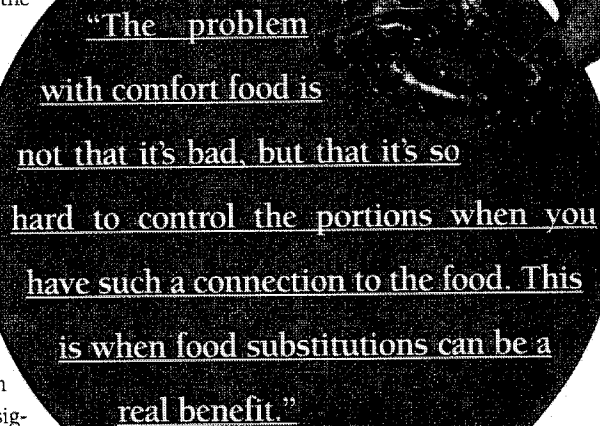
Still, Laboranti advocates trying to rely more on substitutes simply because they tend to be more healthful choices. Ice cream, for instance, is high in fat and calories, and has virtually no nutritional benefit. But substituting sherbet topped with fresh or frozen fruit not only cuts calories significantly, but also gives a nutritional boost.

### *Changing your palate*

Melanie Jordan, healthy eating coach and author of *Have Your Cheeseburger and Keep Your Health Too* (Booklocker 2002), is quite possibly the queen of substitutions. Although she stresses she is not a vegetarian, she eats no meat or poultry, having found acceptable substitutes for both. She began changing her diet some years ago because of a family history of health problems often exacerbated by poor diet. In the process, she lost 20 pounds, although she wasn't really trying to lose weight. In the beginning, a craving for comfort foods – in her case cheeseburgers – kept sabo-

cess with that because I don't have the willpower to just take one bite and walk away," says Jordan. "I realized I had to find an acceptable substitute that would satisfy my palate, my emotions and my appetite."

Jordan, of Aliso Viejo, Calif., has adopted a philosophy of making over foods instead of denying herself. She's been helped by a growing awareness in the food industry that there are many people out there, like herself, who are trying to make better choices. Thus, Jordan makes her cheeseburger from a wide



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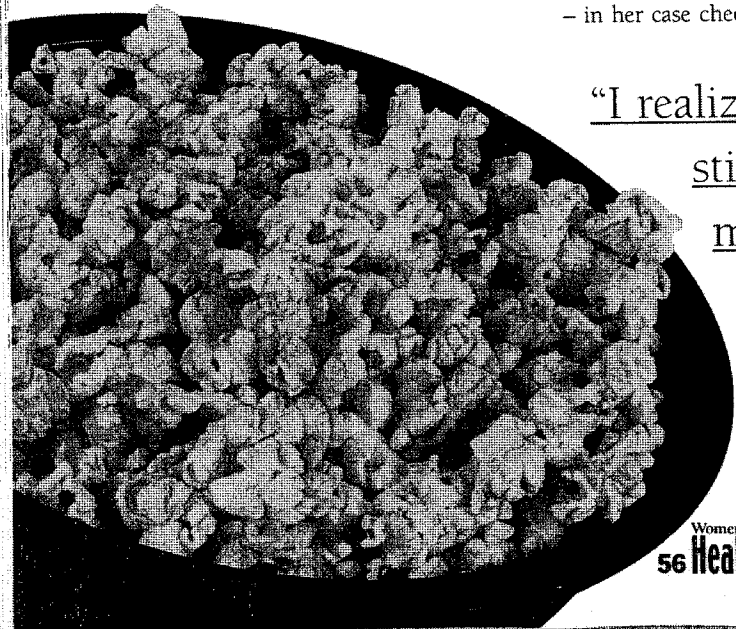
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taging her healthy eating efforts.

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cess with that because I don't have the willpower to just take one bite and walk away," says Jordan. "I realized I had to find an acceptable substitute that would satisfy my palate, my emotions and my appetite."

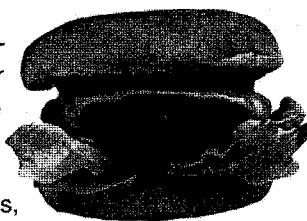
range of delicious meat substitutes that are commonly found in local grocery stores. Put a non-meat burger on a whole wheat bun with a slice of non-fat cheese, plenty of low-fat condiments like ketchup >



**M**elanie Jordan, healthy eating coach and author of *Have Your Cheeseburger and Keep Your Health Too* (Booklocker 2002), has discovered that food substitution is the key to healthful comfort eating. Here are some tips from her on how to remake some common comfort food categories.

**Cheeseburgers and fries:**

For the cheeseburger, substitute a non-meat product such as a Boca® burger (found in the frozen-food section) for the meat, non-fat cheese and a whole-wheat bun. For the fries, depending upon how much time you have, cut up a few potatoes, spray with olive oil, toss with your favorite seasoning, and bake or substitute a low-fat frozen alternative.



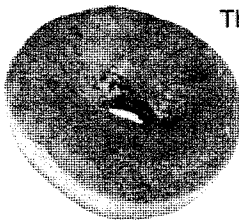
**Home cooking (meat loaf, mashed potatoes, roast chicken, pot roast):**

According to Jordan there are some very tasty products that mimic the homey taste of these traditional "Sunday dinners" without the fat and calories. Mashed potatoes can be made with milk and seasonings instead of butter and still taste great, and there are also a number of fat-free gravies and dressings.



**Donuts/sweet bread products:**

This is a tough one for those who are trying to lose weight, but Jordan says many companies make low-fat muffins. Or, do an Internet search for a low-fat recipe, make a big batch, pop them in the freezer, and thaw one when an urge hits. There are also healthy muffin and bread mixes available online.



**Chips/salty products:**

There are a lot of substitutes for chips, from popcorn to low-fat chips, to seasoned rice cakes. Jordan, who admits she used to eat Cheez Doodles® by the gross, says her favorite is Pirate Booty® by Roberts American Gourmet, an online food company. She claims they taste just like her old Cheez Doodles® but are made with organic grains and are low in fat and calories.

**Ice cream/sweet fat products (creamy mouth feel food):**

Ice cream is an easy fix. There are many brands of frozen yogurt now available in a plethora of flavors. For a milkshake fix, Jordan recommends chocolate soy milk, which she says is thick, creamy and will satisfy a chocolate craving as well.



and mustard, pickle, tomato and lettuce and you've just cut an 800-calorie, high-fat food down to a 300-calorie, high-fiber food with just a few grams of fat. If she wants fries with that, Jordan bakes her own or chooses a low-fat frozen hash brown mix. Jordan says that even if your local supermarket doesn't carry some of these products, they can be ordered online.

Williams has discovered she likes to buy "diet" foods and tweak them to make them more delicious, more healthful, and even lower in calories. For example, she'll buy a Weight Watchers® pizza, remove the pepperoni and substitute spices and vegetables. For her, comfort food is almost always "junk" food simply because that's what she ate growing up. "My mom didn't cook, so dinner might be canned pasta. I recently visited her and she makes a lot for my nephews – foods like grilled cheese sandwiches and Hamburger Helper®," says Williams. "One of my nephews has a weight problem but nobody seems to ask why." The fact that she learned to ask "why" has contributed greatly to healthy changes Williams made in her own eating habits.

In addition, Williams has found alternate ways to satisfy her need for emotional comfort. Instead of eating when she's stressed or sad, she's started to treat herself to pleasures that give her the sensual comfort of food with no calories at all – like a warm bath with scented bath salts in a candlelit room.

Laboranti also suggests an alternate activity like taking a walk or calling a friend. If that doesn't work, take just one bite, or substitute popcorn for those potato chips. Start small and, eventually, you may just see a big change in the way you view food. As Hardesty says, "I've realized that my body is a machine. To run at its best, it needs high-quality fuel." ◆◆

*About the Author: Kelly Burgess is a contributing writer for Women's Health & Fitness and iParenting.com.*