

FACILITATOR'S GUIDE: Cooking Demonstrations to Encourage Healthy Eating



Cooking demonstrations require some advance planning and coordination, but can be a rewarding way to finish a training program or re-engage participants in the training material. Cooking demonstrations should be relaxed events with a festive attitude where participants can learn by doing and then stay to enjoy a delicious meal with their fellow cooks.

Goals of a cooking demonstration

Cooking demonstrations have a variety of goals:

1. Demonstrate how to incorporate locally available vegetables into meals in new and exciting ways
2. Demonstrate how to cook a well-balanced, nutritious meal
3. Provide participants with a relaxing and fun way to build relationships with their fellow group members

Preparing for a cooking demonstration

It is helpful to include participants in the organization of the event. Set aside time at the end of a training session to choose the time and location for the event and assign tasks in an equitable manner. You may need multiple planning sessions for the discussion.

There are many tasks that can be assigned to participants so that the event goes smoothly:

- Recipe preparation (see below)
- Food preparation – vegetables will need to be washed and chopped, potatoes peeled, or beans sifted through!
- Cooking – choose volunteer cooks who are comfortable and excited by the prospect of cooking for a large group of people
- Setting up chairs and tables
- Serving food
- Washing plates, bowls, pots, cooking implements, and utensils after eating
- Sweeping or cleaning up trash from the site

Many items will need to be organized in advance:

- A flipchart or board where you can write the recipes out for all to see and copy
- Sometimes multiple cooking stations are needed to prepare enough food for the group – there should be enough pots, pans, lids, spatulas, cooking fuel, etc. for each station
- Ingredients for cooking, including oil, cooking water, salt, and other spices
- Bowls or plates for everyone
- Utensils for everyone
- Rags or napkins for cleaning up
- Hand washing stations
- Refreshments to complement the meal (avoid sugary drinks)
- Fresh fruits to complement the meal
- Tables to cook on or display the finished dishes
- Chairs for everyone
- Music or entertainment for when participants are eating
- Shade or indoor space for eating

Choosing what to cook during a cooking demonstration

Cooking demonstrations can feature either a single recipe or multiple recipes at a time. Engage participants in the selection of the recipes but collaborate with the recipe developers and cooks to make sure recipes include all three Food Color Groups, use vegetables appropriately, and can be cooked by participants at home.

- Brainstorm with participants a list of vegetables that they would be excited to learn how to cook or see new ways to cook.
- Ask participants if there are any traditional staple foods in their area that are not milled or processed that they want to use instead of heavily milled or processed staple foods.
- Ask participants if there are dishes they already know about and want to learn how to cook.
- Consider giving participants the challenge of preparing a nutritious meal that meets a budget set by participants (for example, the price of a meal could be lower than what someone would spend if they purchased a quick street meal). The meal should have all three Food Color Groups represented, and all ingredients should be purchased from local markets or collected from local gardens. Calculate the price of the meal by dividing the total amount spent on food by the number of people who eat the meal. The price should meet the budget set by participants.

Regardless of the recipes selected, be sure to:

- Use only locally available cooking implements (spatulas and pots) and sources of heat (stoves or fires).
- Find out what staples (White foods) and proteins (Brown foods) are most widely consumed by participants and find recipes that can improve the nutritional content of dishes that use these foods as the base. Consider replacing heavily milled staples, such as white rice, noodles, or maize meal, with staple foods that are less processed, such as brown rice, millet, or sorghum.
- Do not use expensive ingredients that participants do not purchase regularly for household consumption. Although participants may want to eat special foods at the cooking demonstration, it is unlikely that they will be able to replicate these dishes often in their homes.
- Fruits are often not cooked as part of a recipe, but are part of a healthy meal when consumed on the side. Include a fruit as a side dish whenever possible.
- Feature recipes that do not cook vegetables for more than 5–10 minutes. In most recipes, vegetables can be added as the last step and cooked until they are just soft. Cooking heat can destroy many valuable vitamins and may make vegetables taste bitter, so it is best to limit their exposure to heat.
- Do not throw out cooking water once vegetables have been added. Many nutrients will leach from vegetables into the water, so add just enough water to cook vegetables and not throw any away.
- Feature recipes that use a minimal amount of oil, salt, and sugar and do not rely on packaged foods, such as instant noodles.

Day of the event

- Be sure to allow yourself plenty of time at the start of the day to organize the materials needed for the demonstration.
- Set up the food preparation stations and cooking stations so that large groups can gather around them and many people can participate if needed. This might mean stations need to be slightly far away from each other.
- When food is being cooked, make sure someone is explaining what is happening and that everyone can see what is happening. It might be necessary to have people take turns coming close to the pots and pans so they can see inside.
- Small samples can be passed around in bowls if it is helpful for participants to see what the cooked food looks like when it is time to take it off the heat, add more water, add the sauce, etc.
- Food should be served by different people than the cooks to allow the cooks to rest and clean their hands before eating. Food should be served so that everyone can start eating at the same time.
- Allow children to join whenever possible. Although children may provide some distractions for participants during the demonstration, participants will see their children enjoying the prepared foods and this will further build their confidence that they can successfully prepare these foods at home to feed their family. Be sure to prepare enough food so that everyone, including children, is served a sufficient portion.

Discussion points to raise with participants

Finish the event by asking participants to share their reflections. Encourage them to discuss variations they would make to the cooking process, ingredients they would add or omit, and how the dish could be adapted to seasonal shortages of any of the ingredients.