What's Cooking at the Firehouse?    
Healthier Eating Leads to Fit Firefighters

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The firehouse of Engine Company 8, Ladder 1 is situated on Hanover Street at the corner of Charter Street in the North End, amongst narrow streets and restaurants, an area well known for its tight-knit Italian community. And what do Italians do to show their appreciation of a job well done? Being married into an Italian family, I can tell you; they bear gifts of great tasting food. A firehouse is an integral part of every community, and at Engine 8, Ladder 1, you will likely never leave your call of duty on an empty stomach.

Of course, there are firehouses and hungry firefighters all over the city of Boston. Mealtime at the firehouse is more than just eating food. And feeding a large hungry crowd nightly can be a big task. Jim, one of my BFD clients tells me, “Nutrition is not the major consideration when it comes to dinner, but there is always enough food for everyone to eat and be full. When danger is part of your life, why worry about tomorrow? It’s far too common to find three 2-liter bottles of soda and ice cream at every evening meal.” Jim notes, “Most of us get plenty of sugar!” Another firefighter affirms that mealtime at the firehouse is not over the top without regard to health, in fact, he adds, “In the old days, it was beef, beef and more beef, today you see a whole lot more chicken. Most meats are healthy; we always have salad and vegetables. Where we go wrong is the volume. We take large amounts and then eat large quantities.”

As firefighters work to keep our community safe, how can we keep our firefighters safe from poor health and chronic disease? As a nutritionist, I consult with many Boston firefighters, it’s my hope that small changes in meal preparation, food choices and eating habits at the firehouse will translate to healthier firefighters. It is amazing how subtle changes in the diet can accomplish positive health outcomes. One firefighter told me after great success losing weight and lowering his blood pressure, “You just need to lead us in the water and we’ll drink.” So here is my attempt to lead you to water.

Let’s start with a quick lunchtime scenario, from what I hear, the sub shops near the firehouses have no shortage of business! Unfortunately, fast food shops often fall short on good nutrition. Consider bringing a healthy lunch from home versus grabbing an Italian sub on the run. A turkey sandwich has 300 calories while a small Italian sub often contains 600-800 calories. Of course, an occasional sub sandwich is a nice treat, but regular trips to the sub shop are not very healthy friendly.

Here is a sample lunch menu from one of the firehouses: hummus and cheese on the grill with better tomato soup, potato chips, and milk. All items on this menu add up to a big sodium overload! This meal tops off at 2,300 milligrams sodium, that’s over the daily limit in just one meal! You might as well shake a salt shaker directly into your mouth! In Boston, on any given tour, eight out of ten firefighters have hypertension. That makes this salt-rich lunch a job hazard. Simple tweaks to this menu can keep your blood pressure safer. For starters consider substituting the hum with sliced tomato, and purchase one of the lower sodium varieties of tomato soup such as Campbell’s Healthy Request Soups, which have 50% less sodium. Since 20 potato chips contain 150 calories, 10 grams of fat and 180 milligrams of sodium, why not eliminate them altogether? And since it’s hard to stop at just 20 chips, you likely save even more calories and salt!

For dinner-time meal planning at the firehouse, consider trying some of my menu tweaks and changes in the chart below for better health. The menus provided on the next page are actual dinners that have been served at a Boston firehouse recently.

A few more tips for healthier eating at the firehouse:

- Fill a basket of fruit and leave it on the table each and every day.
- Opt for one or occasionally two carbohydrate rich food choices per meal such as bread, pasta, corn, potato, pasta or rice. Fill up with low carbohydrate vegetables such as salad, carrots, broccoli, green beans, peppers and onions, zucchini, summer squash, bell peppers, mushrooms, onions or spinach.
- Consider fruit oriented desserts such as: fruit salad, strawberry shortcake, angel cake with blueberries, berry or apple crisp, or purchase more heart friendly brownie mixes such as the No Pudge brand. Do without the jarred/canned frosting which contain the dangerous heart clogging trans fats.
- Bring a box of fresh granola bars, roasted unsalted almonds and fruit for midday snacks.
- Consider eliminating desserts at least occasionally! But the extra money in the main entree like fresh fish, shrimp, or lean steak.
- Cook what you need, not extras. If there are 14 guys, cook up 14 potatoes, not 10 lb bag.
- Choose whole grain breads, rice and pasta over white at least occasionally.
- Drink more water, less soda. Regular soda has 10 teaspoons of sugar and is sweetened with high fructose corn syrup which can contribute to a fatty liver.
- 4 to 6 ounces of meat per person is enough, purchase accordingly.

Good nutrition starts with small changes. Do your fellow firefighter a favor and encourage healthy foods and reasonable portions to be served at the firehouse.
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<tr>
<th>Sample Firehouse Dinner</th>
<th>What’s Good?</th>
<th>Menu/Tweak and Swaps</th>
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<tr>
<td>Meatloaf, Mashed potato (made with 1 pound of butter), Canned peas, Canned corn, Salad, Frosted Cake with canned frosting, 1% milk</td>
<td>Overall nice balanced meal. Lots of vegetables, which makes it nutrient rich. Use 90% lean beef or milk in some ground chicken breast. Use 90% lean beef or milk in some ground chicken breast. Add 1/2 cup of sauce or salad dressing instead. Add 1/2 cup of sauce or salad dressing instead.</td>
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<td>Roast Beef, Mashed Potatoes, Carrots, Green Beans, Brownies, 1% milk</td>
<td>Again, nice job with the vegetables. Lots of color at this meal making it a healthier one. Beef is a good source of iron. Choose lean cuts or trim excess fat off of roast beef. Make mashed potatoes with 1 or 2 sticks of butter and add in some College Inn light chicken broth for flavor without the fat. Use red skin potatoes and mash skins into mixture this will add fiber and other healthy nutrients. No Pudge brownies or substitute angel cake with strawberries and a bit of whipped cream – no fake ingredients here!</td>
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<td>Spaghetti with meatballs and sausage, Garlic Bread, Salad, Milk, Brownies</td>
<td>Try to substitute regular sausage with chicken sausage to save a bunch of fat calories. Consider using some whole-wheat pasta for fiber. Don’t overuse the butter on the garlic bread, it tastes good yes, but loads on the fat and calories. Salad – go easy on the dressing. Choose Italian or Vinaigrette vs. creamy dressings.</td>
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<td>Fish baked with bread crumbs and butter, Broccoli, Corn, Mashed potatoes, Garlic bread, Ice cream</td>
<td>Rich is a great choice, good for your brain and heart! This meal is a carbohydrate overload bread crumbs, corn, potatoes and bread all very rich in carbohydrates. To create more balance to this meal, delete the garlic bread. For portion control on the dessert, try jello puddings or ice cream sandwiches versus scooping out more ice cream than you need.</td>
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<td>Baked Chicken, Roasted potatoes, Carrots, Salad, Cake with frosting</td>
<td>Overall good meal with baked (not fried - Yeah!) chicken and lots of veggies. Consider purchasing a few sweet potatoes and chopping them up with the white potato. Sweet potatoes are rich in Vitamin A and fiber, which are key for a healthy immune system and eye health. Instead of trans fat filled frosting, what about apple or berry crisp? Fruit seems lacking at dinner and this is a sweet way to enjoy it.</td>
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