Basic Home Maintenance Course: Have you wanted to make those basic home repairs but didn’t know where to start? The Buncombe County Cooperative Extension Center is offering a five-series Basic Home Maintenance Course beginning Tuesday, February 26 from 5:30-7:30 pm. Remaining dates for the course are: February 28, March 4, 6 & 11. Some topics to be covered are: saving on your heating and cooling bills, basic plumbing repairs, interior and exterior maintenance, landscaping and lawn care, indoor air quality, common household pests, etc. The fee of $20 includes all materials. The class will be held at the Buncombe County Center of North Carolina Cooperative Extension, 94 Coxe Avenue, Asheville. Space is limited, pre-registration is required. For more information call 828-255-5522.

WNC Clean Streams: Soil erosion, pesticides, fertilizers, household products and other contaminants find their way into our streams and water supplies. There are steps we can take to preserve and protect our mountain water resources. The WNC Clean Streams program, sponsored by N. C. Cooperative Extension, will be held at The North Carolina Arboretum on February 26, 9:00 am-4:30 pm, with sessions for both landscape professionals and homeowners. The registration fee of $30 includes materials and lunch. Information and a registration form can be found at http://henderson.ces.ncsu.edu/content/cleanstreams or you may contact the Buncombe County Extension Center at 255-5522. Registration deadline is February 15.

Inflammation and Heart Disease – Is There a Link?

In February, we often think about our hearts and ways to prevent heart disease, as well as who will receive our valentines. Lately there has been a focus on low-grade, chronic inflammation and heart disease. It is still not known whether the connection between inflammation and heart disease is a causal relationship or just that the inflammation goes along with heart disease. With heart disease the blood vessels can have damage and to heal this damage the body may have inflammatory cells come into the vessel wall. Many of the known risk factors for heart disease can also cause an inflammatory response such as obesity, high blood pressure, unhealthy cholesterol levels, and smoking.

Though low doses of Aspirin, 81 mg daily, have been shown to reduce the risk for heart disease, no other anti-inflammatory medicine has been shown to do this. But some of the same steps that help prevent cardiovascular disease also may reduce low-grade chronic inflammation. These are: eat a moderate amount of fish to receive omega-3 fats in your diet, don’t smoke, talk to your doctor about taking a low-dose aspirin, taking your statin medication, if it is prescribed for you, controlling your blood pressure, keeping your weight within normal limits, and possibly getting regular aerobic exercise. Even though we don’t know if or what the link may be between inflammation and heart disease, it seems that following behaviors that reduce your risk for both can lead to a healthy life.

Source: University of California, Berkeley Wellness Letter January 2008

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Saving Your Re$ources

The trip to the grocery store is becoming more challenging as food prices continue to rise. By planning ahead before you step in the grocery store door, you may be able to save on your food budget. Take the time to review the newspaper ads, plan meals using what is on sale, check the cabinets for what you may already have, and make a shopping list. By doing these four things you are more likely to find the best buys, avoid impulse buying and eliminate extra trips for items that were forgotten. Taking advantage of seasonal specials can save you money as fresh fruits and vegetables are generally less expensive when in great supply. Planning for the leftovers to be used in casseroles, soups, snacks and in lunch boxes will also help stretch the food budget.

Clipping coupons will save you money only if the item is one you would usually buy and if the item is less expensive than similar items. Most of the cents-off coupons by the manufacturers are for the more expensive, highly processed foods or for foods in abundant supply. However, using coupons for coffee, prepared foods, cereals, flour and flour mix products can save about 10% in most food budgets. Don’t justify buying a product your family doesn’t need just because you have a coupon. Most times buying store brands will save you money and the quality is comparable. Knowing the regular prices of items you generally buy will help you recognize when an advertised special is really a bargain. Check the unit pricing which is posted below the item. If a store offers unit prices, you can confirm if the 12-ounce can of green beans is a better buy than a 7-ounce can.

Cooking with Kids

The wintertime can be a great time to do some cooking with your kids. When you are looking for a fun indoor activity that also helps them learn healthy behaviors, turn to cooking or baking healthy meals and snacks. Here are some age appropriate tasks that children can do to help with the meal or preparing recipes.

3 year olds: Wash fruits and vegetables, pour measured liquids into bowl, stir dry ingredients, tear lettuce and help set table.

4 years olds: Open packages, get ingredients out of fridge, peel bananas or oranges, mash and stir ingredients, help set table and spoon out cookies.

5 and 6 year olds: Cut soft foods with dull knife, measure ingredients, stir mixtures, set the table and knead small loaf of bread.

7 and 8 year olds: Help plan the meal, get ingredients out from cupboards and refrigerator, prepare salad from cut vegetables, begin to read recipes, roll and shape cookies and knead dough for larger bread.

9 to 12 year olds: Start to learn how to follow the recipe, open cans, use microwave with supervision, turn on oven to desired temperature, shred cheese and vegetables, use small appliances with supervision and plan a simple meal.

Remember, they still need your supervision to ensure that they prepare a safe meal or snack. Arrange the work area to match the child’s height. Review stove and oven safety in order to prevent burns. Keep pot and pan handles towards the back of the stove. Remind them to wash hands with soap and warm water and that all utensils, dishes, counter tops and cutting boards are clean as well. Also, don’t cross contaminate cooked foods with raw foods and show them how to use a food thermometer to determine if the foods are cooked to the proper temperature.

Is It Edible or Just a Science Project?

Have you ever been getting something out of the freezer and found something else that you put away but just never got out and used? You may wonder if it is still safe to eat or has it become your child’s science project? The answer is as long as it has stayed frozen, it is safe to eat. It just loses some of its quality. If your food does get freezer burn, you can still safely eat it, but the quality will deplete. To prevent freezer burn keep your freezer at 0°F or lower, wrap or store in airtight freezer wraps or containers, and make sure your freezer has a tight seal. The foods in your refrigerator are different. They can actually begin to go bad and the storage time for foods will vary depending on the type of food. For a complete list of storage recommendations for foods, contact our office or go to: http://www.oznet.k-state.edu/humannutrition/hrap/storage/stochart.htm.
Energy Tips That Will Help to Lower Your Monthly Utilities

With the rising costs of food, gas and about everything that affects our daily lives, it is becoming harder for families to stay within their set budgets. Though our monthly utilities are a big expense there are some changes you can make to help lower them.

- Take advantage of the equal payment plans offered by most utilities. These plans even out monthly payments and allow consumers to reduce their winter bills by paying more during other times of the year when consumption is typically much lower. Your local provider can provide you with the information on their programs.

- One of the most important actions you can take is to have your furnace and gas appliances serviced annually by a qualified contractor to ensure safety and maximum energy-efficiency.

- Change or clean filters on the furnace as they become dirty.

- Clean around warm-air registers as needed.

- Set your thermostat as low as is comfortable to you and your family.

- Put on your favorite sweater, use throw blankets and wear heavier socks to help keep you comfortable when you reduce the thermostat setting.

- Increase your activity level at home.

- Rearrange furniture by placing it against inside walls. You’re less likely to feel cool drafts if you’re not sitting next to the outside walls.

- Install a programmable thermostat and set it to accurately follow your family’s normal routine. A programmable thermostat allows you to adjust the times and temperature settings of your furnace or according to a pre-set schedule.

- Seal leaks around doors, windows and other openings, such as pipes or ducts, with caulking or weather-stripping.

- Make certain you use your kitchen and bathroom ventilation wisely. Use only when needed and turn it off as soon as it has done its job. The fans provide ventilation, but they will also pull warm air out of a household quickly.

- Purchase inexpensive, pre-cut insulation gaskets and seal out the cold air entering your home through electrical switches and outlet plates, particularly those on outside walls. Place child safety covers in all outlets not used.

- Check to see if your attic and crawlspace and/or basement have recommended levels of insulation. Add insulation as needed. If you are uncertain of how much insulation you need, visit: http://www.ornl.gov/sci/roofs+walls/insulation/ins_05.html and enter your zip code.

- Use draperies, awnings, blinds or shutters on all windows to lessen the loss of heat through the glass. In winter, on southern facing windows, keep window coverings open on sunny days to let the sun’s warmth in and close them at night to insulate against cold, outside air.
Has Your Well Been Tested?

If you forgot to make it a New Year’s Resolution, it isn’t too late to have your well tested by either a public or private laboratory. We recommend that you test it once a year and the beginning of the year is as good a time as any. Yearly testing is necessary because groundwater travels and may pick up pollutants elsewhere. Even if you are doing everything to prevent your well from being contaminated, it may become polluted from other people’s activities.

Although it would be expensive and difficult to test your water for every possible pollutant, some basic tests should be conducted. You should test for bacteria and nitrates since both can cause health problems. If your water has high bacteria or nitrate levels, talk to a county environmental health specialist - there may be problems with the location or construction of the well.

Did you know salt can be used to........

- Clean a glass coffee pot - Fill it with a quarter cup of table salt and a dozen ice cubes. Swish the mixture around, let it sit for half an hour. Fill it with cold water and rinse.
- Clean tarnished copper - Fill a 16-ounce spray bottle with hot white vinegar and 3 tablespoons of salt. Spray it into the copper, let sit briefly, then rub clean. (Don’t use on lacquered copper.)
- Clean artificial flowers - Put them in a bag of salt and shake the bag.
- Pick up a dropped egg - If an egg breaks on the kitchen floor, sprinkle it with salt. Leave it for 20 minutes, then wipe it up.

Individuals with disabilities who would like to participate in any program mentioned in this newsletter but who need special assistance to do so, should call the Extension Center at 828-255-5522 at least five days prior to the event.