Start your new year with balanced meals, fruits and vegetables and moderation: a NetWellness column

By Plain Dealer guest columnist
December 30, 2009, 8:15AM

Many people always have pork and sauerkraut for dinner on New Year's Day. Although most agree that it's for "good luck," it is difficult to determine with certainty where this custom started.

It appears to be a German or a Pennsylvania Dutch (really, it's Pennsylvania Deutsch) tradition that has migrated to other portions of American culture.

Down South other practices prevail. There, New Year's Day calls for black-eyed peas -- particularly a dish called Hoppin' John, with seasonings and rice -- and collard greens.

Although the origin of these New Year's traditions may be elusive, the details of their nutrition are much easier to determine.

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Standard Nutrient Database, 3 ounces of lean center loin pork roast has about 170 calories and less than 8 grams of fat.

A half-cup of canned sauerkraut has only 15 calories, but a whopping 470 milligrams of sodium. Even the low-sodium version is packed with 220 milligrams. If you're watching your salt intake, you just might want to cook up some cabbage instead: a half-cup of cooked cabbage has just 15 calories and a mere 6 milligrams of sodium.
If you're more interested in the Southern tradition, black-eyed peas (listed as "cowpeas" in the Nutrient Database) have about 100 calories per half-cup, and offer 5.5 grams of fiber if you cook them yourself or about 4 grams of fiber if you use a canned version. Mix them with a half-cup of cooked white long-grain rice and you'll add another 100 calories. If you choose brown rice, you'll add a couple grams of fiber to the meal as well as some extra nutrients. And, of course, if you add pork or pork fat to the mix, you'll have to account for the extra fat and calories -- all depending on your recipe.

Collard greens would be a good choice to add to almost any meal. A half-cup of boiled, drained collards have just 25 calories but also offer 130 milligrams of calcium. They're also chock-full of phytonutrients that your body will thank you for.

The bottom line? Start out the new year right -- not necessarily with any particular dish, but by eating balanced meals, plenty of fruits and vegetables, and following the age-old tradition of "Everything in moderation."