



Meals That Heal

Meet the New Jersey nonprofit providing nutritious food to families experiencing childhood illness.

By Julie Kendrick
Photo by Valery Rizzo

When Stacey Antine's father was being treated for cancer, she knew he was getting great medical care, but one area of support was lacking: nutrition. Her family didn't receive much guidance—just a handout and the suggestion that her dad eat crackers to combat his nausea. But the New Jersey-based dietitian knew the right food could help his healing process. "Patients need nutrient-dense calories to maintain their weight and to speed up recovery," Antine says. Even with her professional training, she had to figure out what type of foods would best meet the specific needs of cancer patients. When her dad recovered, Antine decided to couple her newfound expertise along with her passion for encouraging kids to eat more healthfully, to help caregivers with children going through treatment.

WHAT SHE DID

Antine launched Healing Meals in 2016. She and volunteers prepare soups, snacks, meals and desserts for kids and their families that are stocked in freezers located in outpatient treatment areas at Hackensack University Medical Center and at St. Joseph's Children's Hospital in Paterson, New Jersey. "It's so emotionally draining to help a loved one with a cancer diagnosis. No one wants to go home from the clinic and cook," she says. The free meals are tasty and nutritious for anyone, but especially those coping with illnesses like cancer that can affect taste and appetite. "Sometimes animal proteins can taste metallic to those who are in treatment, so we emphasize plant-based proteins, critical for tissue regeneration, in dishes like Italian lentil soup," explains Antine. Another offering: Gingersnaps, which have a double-punch of healing ingredients—nausea-combating ginger plus molasses, which is high in iron. (Stores of this mineral can be depleted during a prolonged illness.)

WHY IT'S COOL

The organization has provided 45,000 meals to patients and families to date. One of the Healing Meals volunteers is Sarah Harinstein. She and her daughter, now 14, are cancer survivors. "When you're living through the devastation of a child's illness, one of the first things to go by the wayside is self-care," she says. "Volunteering has been a meaningful way for us to give back and to support the cancer community." Nan Norbitz Kelly, executive director of Tomorrows Children's Fund, a nonprofit that provides financial support to families whose children have cancer or a serious blood disorder, says these meals are important in bringing normalcy to families' lives: "After being in the clinic for a long day of treatment, a home-cooked meal can mean so much."



Scan with your phone's camera for helpful advice on eating during cancer treatment.