



Somewhere over the rainbow

A closer look at vegetables and fruits

Your mother was right. So was your doctor, dietician, teacher and everyone else who told you to eat more vegetables and fruits. While this may seem like one of the most obvious pieces of nutrition advice, it continues to be one that we need to work on, as some recent research has suggested. Active people who prepare meals on the run are actually some of the worst culprits of skipping out on these super-foods. If you need more motivation as to why you should base your diet around vegetables and fruits, here are 10 important reasons:

Biggest part of Canada's Food Guide

Canada's Food Guide uses a rainbow to represent the food groups. The largest band is the outermost stripe that represents the group you should consume the most number of servings from. Not surprisingly that group is vegetables and fruits. Adults are encouraged to consume 7 to 10 servings per day. One serving is one half cup raw or cooked or 1 cup/250 mL salad or a medium whole fruit. Aim to spread out your servings across the day in a series of smaller meals and snacks. I recommend that at least four to seven of your servings are vegetables and two to four fruit.

Fight disease

Eating more fruits and vegetables has been suggested as a preventive measure for just about every chronic health condition and disease. While it's difficult to decipher whether it's the antioxidants that fight free radicals in the body or specific vitamins or fibres that have the health benefits, it's certain that eating more is something you should consider in your arsenal for disease protection. While science has had difficulty isolating single nutrients in studies to prove specific benefits, it seems the whole fruits and vegetables and variety are the best approach.

Boost immunity

Distinct from disease is illness. Vegetables and fruits are rich in a plethora of nutrients that can keep us healthy, not only vitamin C. While we don't know how the specific mechanisms of how fresh produce help the immune system, it's likely the antioxidants. Go for the richest and brightest colours to enhance your intake of antioxidants.

Fundamental to weight control

I don't recommend fad diets as a long-term solution for weight loss. However, I have noticed that almost every diet or nutrition trend is based upon eating more vegetables and fruits. The key to take away from all the commercial weight loss programs is that water and fibre-rich produce fill you up and keep you full, which can help you eat smaller quantities of calorie dense foods.

When you add vegetables to a recipe, you make it a lower number of calories per serving.

Fibre-packed

Most of us realize that fibre is good for our bowels and keeping us "regular," but fibre is also beneficial for diabetes, heart health and weight management. Vegetables and fruits are particularly high in soluble fibre, which aids in slowing down digestion and absorption, thus keeping one full longer.

Hydration

We often overlook our food as a source of fluids, but vegetables and fruits are often water-rich and that can contribute to better overall hydration.

Nature's energy bars

Fruits and vegetables can be a convenient way to get carbohydrates while on the run. Consider bananas, apples or even potatoes as an option to eat while training. If you're sensitive to fibre before or during training, then consider easy-to-digest options like applesauce.

Enhances absorption of other nutrients

Vitamin C rich foods such as strawberries, red peppers and potatoes can help our bodies absorb iron, a nutrient that athletes have greater demands for. Dark leafy greens help the body to retain more calcium, which is beneficial for bone health.

Fat-free, sodium-free, cholesterol-free

Most vegetables and fruits in their natural state don't have a lot of the additives we're told to stay away from. They can be a good alternative crunchy snack option when you're looking to mindlessly munch.

Delicious

Last but not least, vegetables and fruits can be very tasty. They add depth and flavour to many dishes and provide a burst of freshness with every bite.

While individual types of vegetables and fruits have specific health benefits, the message to have a variety is the most important. If you always eat the same vegetables you always get the same nutrients. By trying a new fruit or vegetable and rotating your purchases, you can enhance your variety. Of course getting what's local and in season is a great option so visit your provincial produce association for a guide, or get to know your local farmer at the market. A great way to try new produce is when you dine out; it takes the guesswork out of cooking the product and minimizes the opportunity for waste. If you're still thinking, yes but vegetables and fruits are so BORING and don't taste good, then read on for some fresh ideas.

Dark leafy greens

If you haven't already tried a green smoothie you've been missing out. Combine two handfuls of mixed greens with some frozen fruit, a touch of honey, a spoonful of natural nut or seed butter (e.g., almond butter) and water. You can boost the smoothie with extras like protein powder, ground chia or flaxseeds or whatever add-ins you like. Bitter dark leafy



rainbow

greens like kale, rapini and dandelion can be blanched in boiling water for two minutes to make the flavour milder. Serve with a touch of lemon or lime juice for a savoury side dish.

Bright orange vegetables

Squash or sweet potato is a great option for a dinner side dish. To prepare squash, simply slice in half, remove seeds, bake or microwave until softened and then scoop contents out of the skin. Serve with a drizzle of olive oil and fresh pepper. For a crunchy raw vegetable option, serve raw sweet potato sticks with some hummus as dip.

Citrus fruits

The tartness of citrus is great with the savoury taste of low-fat cottage or ricotta cheese. This balanced snack will keep you fuelled for several hours. Citrus is also a great addition to mild meats like chicken and fish. Try a fresh grapefruit salsa to top your next meal.

Berries

Why not serve sweet or tart berries with meat or vegetables such as a raspberry puree with chicken or blackberry with salmon? Top a spinach salad with blueberries and pumpkin seeds. For nights when you want to snack, frozen berries make a great option as you can eat them slowly, letting each one melt in your mouth.

Starchy vegetables

Corn, peas, carrots and parsnips get a bad reputation for being high in carbohydrates. Although higher in calories than other vegetables, they are still nutrient packed. Snacking on carrots is much healthier than chips of course. Use fresh corn and peas on salads to make them more filling. Snap peas and snow peas make a portable vegetable snack.

Portable fruits

Apples, bananas, pears and dried fruits end up being a fall back for many of us because they are easy to grab-and-go. If you find yourself hungry between meals, pack a few of these grab and go fruits before you run out the door each day. If you're home and have time, try slicing pears onto a spinach salad or baking an apple and sprinkling it with cinnamon for dessert.

Fragrant herbs and spices

If you think vegetables are bland, then it's time to explore herbs and spices. Derived from plants, these flavour-packed toppings go a long way. Try fresh basil on a home-made whole-grain crust pizza or oregano on your Greek salad. Or take the heat up a notch with turmeric, a cancer-fighting spice that tastes great with chicken, fish or beans.

Remember the key to eating more produce is to have it at your fingertips. Always keep chopped up fresh fruits and vegetables in your fridge. Using produce storage bags and containers and putting them in your crisper can help extend their shelf life. If you make a commitment to cutting up produce twice per week you'll be set. If you can't see this happening, then consider buying it pre-cut to save time. Keep a variety of frozen options for veggies and fruits on hand in case you don't have time for chopping and prepping. ❖

What about organic?



Organic produce is touted to be beneficial for a number of reasons. For starters it helps sustain the environment through the farming practices. Many also claim it tastes more flavourful and fresh, which is an added bonus. The nutrition benefits are less clear, with research studies being unable to consistently show nutritional benefits. Fewer pesticides on the product mean less in the body, which is probably a good thing. The question of price is an important one because organic produce is often more expensive, leaving price-conscious consumers wondering what is the best buy? Typically produce that you eat the skins on (berries, many fruits and some vegetables) contain the highest amount of pesticides so are probably worthwhile to consider buying organic. These are referred to as the "dirty dozen" list. Ultimately, if you have a limited budget, don't let fear of not eating organic stop you from eating more produce; this should not be a limiting factor.

Correction note: in last month's article on reading nutrition labels, I stated that hydrogenated oils contain trans fat. While partially hydrogenated oils do contain trans fat, fully hydrogenated oils actually do not. In some cases, however, the manufacturer does not specify in the ingredients list so be cautious when reading labels. ❖

About Alexis

Alexis Williams is a registered dietitian and personal trainer in Burlington, Ontario. She is an avid runner and triathlete. Visit her website www.transitionhealth.ca for more articles and ideas or to contact Alexis for online or in-person nutrition coaching services. You can get recipes and nutrition tips by becoming a fan of Transition Health on Facebook.