

Incorporating fruits and vegetables into your diet

Most people know that fruits and vegetables are an important part of a balanced diet. But getting your 4-5 cups/day^{1,2} can be a challenge, especially when you're busy. A produce-rich diet offers many benefits:³

- Lowers blood pressure
- Reduces the risk of heart disease and stroke
- Lowers the risk of problems with your eyes and digestive system
- Stabilizes blood sugar

The pot of gold at the end of the rainbow

To get the most from produce, choose a wide variety of colors. Some examples include: dark leafy greens, deep yellows, oranges and reds.³ Eating colorful fruits and vegetables gives your body the nutrients needed to prevent sickness.¹ They can also better your quality and quantity of life.³

Red and pink: Lycopene is a plant pigment that lowers the risk of prostate and other cancers. It is found in tomatoes, watermelon and pink grapefruit. Anthocyanins prevent cell damage and promote heart health. They are found in strawberries, raspberries and red grapes. Other sources of lycopene or anthocyanins include:

- Beets
- Cherries
- Cranberries
- Pomegranates
- Radishes
- Red apples
- Red cabbage
- Red peppers
- Red potatoes
- Rhubarb

White: White fruits and veggies are pigmented by anthoxanthins. They contain chemicals that lower cholesterol and blood pressure and reduce your chances of stomach cancer and heart disease. Bananas and potatoes are excellent sources of potassium. Get your potassium and anthoxanthins from:

- Cauliflower
- Garlic
- Ginger
- Jicama
- Mushrooms
- Onions
- Parsnips
- Turnips

Orange and yellow: Carotenoids reduce the risk of cancer and heart disease, improve immune system function, and maintain healthy eyes and mucous membranes. These can be found in sweet potatoes, pumpkins and carrots. Citrus fruits provide vitamin C and folate, which reduces the risk of birth defects. You can get beta-carotene and vitamin C from:

- Apricots
- Butternut squash
- Cantaloupe
- Grapefruit
- Lemons
- Mangoes
- Nectarines
- Oranges
- Papayas
- Peaches
- Pears
- Persimmons
- Pineapple
- Rutabagas
- Sweet corn
- Tangerines
- Yellow apples
- Yellow peppers
- Yellow squash
- Yellow tomatoes

Blue and purple: Antioxidants give blueberries, grapes, plums and eggplant their indigo hue. They protect cells from damage, reduce the risk of heart disease, cancer, and stroke, and improve memory function. Other blue and purple sources of antioxidants include:

- Blackberries
- Figs
- Prunes
- Raisins

Green: Lutein helps to reduce the risk of age-related vision loss. It is found in spinach, green peppers, peas, cucumber, celery and dark leafy greens. Leafy greens are also an excellent source of birth defect-fighting folate. Indoles protect against some types of cancer. They are found in artichokes, broccoli, cabbage and brussels sprouts. Other sources of lutein, folate and indoles include:

- Asparagus
- Avocados
- Green apples
- Green beans
- Green grapes
- Green onions
- Green peppers
- Honeydew melon
- Kiwi
- Lettuce
- Limes
- Zucchini

Best bet fruits and veggies

You'll get the most benefit from fruits and vegetables you like, because you'll eat them more. But if you're already a produce-lover, these heavy hitters deliver big health benefits.⁴

Sweet potatoes: Substitute these for white potatoes when possible. They're loaded with vitamin C, carotenoids, potassium and fiber. Eat them mashed with unsweetened applesauce, sliced and baked into fries, or baked with a crushed pineapple topping.

Mangoes: Eat a cup of mango in salsa or with yogurt to get 75% of your daily vitamin C, as well as vitamin A, potassium and fiber. Mangoes are among the fruits least likely to carry pesticide residue.

Broccoli: Broccoli is a great source of vitamin C, carotenoids and folic acid. Eat it raw, boil it for 4-7 minutes or steam it so it is still firm, then add lemon juice. You can also stir-fry it in olive oil and chopped garlic.

Garbanzo beans: Also called chickpeas, these canned beans are part of every well-stocked pantry. Drain them, rinse them and toss them on a salad for added protein, fiber, iron, magnesium, potassium and zinc. Add them to vegetable soup or pasta sauce for a high protein meat substitute. Or, make them into hummus for a filling veggie dip or sandwich spread.

Watermelon: Popular with both children and adults, watermelon provides vitamin A, vitamin C and potassium. Bored with watermelon slices? Make it into salsa or a chilled soup for a twist.

Butternut squash: Rich in vitamin A, vitamin C and fiber, butternut squash makes a tasty soup. It can also be baked and mashed, as an alternative to mashed potatoes.

Leafy greens: Don't get stuck in an iceberg rut. Kale, collards, spinach, turnip greens, mustard greens, Swiss chard and other leafy greens provide vitamin A, potassium, magnesium, vitamin C, calcium, iron, lutein, vitamin K, folate and fiber. Use them as a salad base, or serve them alone with lemon juice or red wine vinegar.

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Sneak more fruits and veggies into your diet

1. Microwave an egg and your favorite diced veggies for a quick omelette.⁵
2. Top oatmeal, granola, cold cereal or yogurt with fresh berries or sliced bananas.
3. Substitute lentils for half (or all!) of the ground beef in tacos, pasta sauce, stew, etc.
4. Make a smoothie with two cups of fresh/frozen fruit, half a cup of juice, and half a cup of milk or soy milk for protein.
5. Bring apples or celery and peanut butter to work, for a filling snack.
6. Chop lettuce, grate carrots and wash grape tomatoes at the beginning of the week. Having the ingredients ready in your refrigerator makes it easier to prepare a salad.
7. If you snack while watching TV, substitute pepper spears or edamame for popcorn or chips.
8. Add lettuce, sprouts, cucumber slices or tomato slices to your sandwiches.
9. Use the week's leftover veggies to make soup. Add canned or frozen vegetables, lentils, and beans for an easy and filling meal.
10. Top pizzas with mushrooms, peppers, tomato slices, artichoke hearts or spinach instead of meat to boost the nutrition value.

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Resources

Still not sure how to work in more fruits and veggies? Look up the *Top 10 Healthy Ways to Cook Fruits & Vegetables* on the Produce for Better Health Foundation's website at fruitsandveggiesmorematters.org.

Sources

1 United States Department of Agriculture, *Inside the Pyramid* (September 11, 2008): mypyramid.gov

2 United States Department of Agriculture, *Inside the Pyramid* (October 1, 2009): mypyramid.gov

3 Harvard School of Public Health, *The Nutrition Source* (accessed August 9, 2010): hsp.harvard.edu/nutritionsource/

4 Center for Science in the Public Interest, *Best Foods* (accessed August 9, 2010): cspinet.org

5 Produce for Better Health Foundation, *Top 10 Healthy Ways to Cook Fruits & Vegetables* (accessed August 9, 2010): fruitsandveggiesmorematters.org