



Fruits & Vegetables: The Vitamin Connection

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We've all heard nutrition recommendations that emphasize increasing daily fruit and vegetable consumption. While some people have found the pleasure and tastiness of these food groups, others feel it to be a burdensome thing on the to-do list that never manages to get done. There is one time of year however that most agree that eating more fruits and vegetables just isn't so bad-- that time is now, during the end of summer when fruits and vegetables are at their peak, bursting with flavor and nutrients! Even in Wyoming, where the growing season is notably shorter than in many parts of the country, there are fresh, local fruits and vegetables available in most stores, farms and produce stands. So load up your shopping basket and learn more about why you're not only benefiting a farmer, but doing your body good as well!



It's for good reason that health professionals across the board recommend daily doses of fruits and vegetables. Fruits and vegetables are one of nature's remedies. They are naturally loaded with nutrients, many of which modern science isn't sure exactly how they all work together within the body. When eaten whole the nourishment provided to benefit the body is much better than individual nutrient supplements contained in pill or capsule form.

For starters, fruits and vegetables are loaded with vitamins. Vitamins are compounds that are vital for life. Two biggies that we think of in fruit and vegetables are vitamin A and vitamin C. Vitamin A is a fat soluble vitamin, meaning it is stored and dissolves in fat versus water. Vitamin A comes from animal sources of food such as milk, cheese, butter and eggs. However, our bodies can convert vitamin A from a plant substance called beta-carotene. Beta-carotene is prolific in dark green vegetables as well as dark orange and yellow fruits and veggies.

Think of those hearty garden greens, fresh dug carrots and beautiful fall pumpkins and winter squash. Vitamin A is mostly known for eye health. This nutrient allows our eyes to adjust and see normally at lower light levels. It is also helpful in promoting growth of healthy body cells and tissues, fighting infections by keeping skin healthy and reducing the risk for various diseases and certain cancers. Sounds like a win-win for sure; eating delicious food AND getting disease protection!

Vitamin C is another power-house vitamin we get from fruits and vegetables. Vitamin C is water-soluble and not stored in the body; excess is excreted in urine and perspiration. This means we need to eat a vitamin C source daily. Vitamin C helps produce collagen that holds muscle, bones and other tissues together and keeps blood vessel walls firm and protects the body from bruising. Vitamin C also helps the body absorb iron from plant sources of food and keeps gums healthy and helps wounds and cuts heal while boosting immune function. To acquire this amazing vitamin, eat plenty of broccoli, peppers, spinach, tomatoes and cabbage. Citrus fruits are also good sources during winter months.

One of the more unique aspects of fruits and vegetables is the plethora of antioxidants and phytochemicals they contain. Antioxidants are substances that slow or prevent oxidative damage to cells and tissues. In this way they can reduce the risk of chronic disease and counter the effects of free-radicals in the body. Phytochemicals are chemicals that plants naturally produce to protect themselves. Scientists are still trying to pinpoint exactly how these benefit the human body, but the thought is they can protect against some cancers, heart disease and other chronic conditions. Phytochemicals are only acquired by eating whole plant foods, so supplements won't benefit here. Various phytochemicals are noted in plants by the varying colors of fruits and vegetables--thus is it said, *eating a rainbow of colors* each week ensures you are eating a wide variety of nutrients and protective compounds that benefit the body.

So how do we ensure we get the most out of the nutrients fruits and vegetables have to offer? Proper cooking and storage is a good place to start after purchasing fresh fruits and veggies. By growing your own or purchasing produce in season from a local producer you can guarantee you're getting the most of what the plant has to offer. Most nutrients degrade with time, temperature and light--the closer the point of consumption is to where the produce is grown the more intact nutrients your produce will contain. Buying frozen fruits and vegetables is another great option when fresh produce is not available. Once the produce makes it to the kitchen, if not eating fresh, cook fruits and vegetables minimally over low heat, just until tender. If you're in a rut and wanting to try various cooking methods, try baking, boiling, steaming, pan-frying, scalloped, stir-frying, roasting or grilling. You may be surprised at how simply changing the cooking method can bring out new flavors and textures in that same old vegetable.

Something to try with various vegetables you might be gathering at the end of the summer season and into the fall is roasting. Roasting vegetables uses a little bit of oil and some favorite spices to enhance flavor, but the method itself tends to bring out a delicious caramelized flavor so often less is more when it comes to additions to the vegetables themselves. Vegetables to try roasting are potatoes, cauliflower, broccoli, green beans, asparagus, carrots, squash, peppers, zucchini and summer squash, onions, garlic, Brussels sprouts, mushrooms, beets and turnips.

Roasted Vegetables:

Clean vegetables and cut into bite-sized & uniform pieces.

Place on baking pan or sheet, coated with olive or canola oil.

Add desired spices such as garlic, thyme, chili powder, rosemary, salt or pepper.



Roast at 400°F 15-30 minutes until tender. Time will depend on size and density of vegetables used. For dense vegetables like potatoes, pre-cook in the microwave about 5 minutes to reduce roasting time.

For more recipe ideas using local, seasonal Wyoming produce check out Eat Wyoming's Local Food Guide recipe section in print or online:

www.wyomingextension.org/eatwyoming/recipes.asp

For more information on “Living Well in Wyoming”, contact your University of Wyoming Extension Nutrition and Food Safety Educator!



Sources: *Cent\$ible Nutrition* curriculum and cookbook, University of Wyoming Extension.

Wyoming Local Foods- THE GUIDE- Eat Wyoming, Wyoming Local Foods Project, University of Wyoming Extension.

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