

Protecting Your Health With Fruits and Vegetables

A high intake of fruits and veggies can protect your health. Yet, most Americans fall short of the recommended five to nine servings a day.

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Do you eat the number of fruits and vegetables you need each day to protect your health? You may be surprised that most Americans don't.

Unfortunately, we fall far short of the national targets. In 2009, about a third of adults consumed fruit two or more times a day. Only a quarter of adults consumed vegetables three or more times a day.

How much is enough?The United States Department of Agriculture now suggests different minimum servings of fruits and vegetables based on age and gender.

Children should eat at least a cup of fruit a day and a cup or more of vegetables (more for older kids). Adults should eat about two cups of fruit and up to three cups of vegetables.

Skimping on fruits and vegetables is associated with poor health. That includes a greater chance of obesity, heart disease, stroke, type 2 diabetes and some kinds of cancer.

It takes some planning, but getting in your daily quota is easier than it seems. A one-cup serving of fruit equals only one cup of fruit or 100 percent fruit juice, or a half-cup of dried fruit. A cup of vegetables is one cup of raw or cooked vegetables or vegetable juice, or two cups of raw leafy greens.

The benefit is in the foodWhat's the magic? Along with providing vitamins, minerals and fiber, fruits and veggies have phytochemicals. Phytochemicals give natural foods their color. Most scientists believe these natural chemicals are key players in disease prevention. They are thought to help prevent or reduce the risk of certain types of cancer, heart disease, diabetes and high blood pressure.

Supplements containing phytochemicals have not been proven to be safe or effective. That's why it's better to skip the pills and supplements and opt for the real deal.

Planning your dietStart by keeping healthy foods in sight. Put a bowl of fruit on the kitchen counter. Or keep cut-up fruits and veggies in a container in the fridge.

Below is an example of how to get in seven servings of fruits and veggies.

Breakfast: Whole-grain cereal with 1/2 cup berries or one small sliced banana.

Snack: Medium apple or pear.

Lunch: Salad with 1 cup greens and 1/2 cup chopped veggies. Add grilled chicken and vinaigrette or have a sandwich on the side.

Snack: Six or seven baby carrots and a handful of almonds.

Dinner: Fish or chicken with 1/2 cup broccoli and one small sweet potato.

Other ideas

- Add steamed broccoli, cauliflower, asparagus or artichoke hearts to pasta.
- Keep frozen veggies on hand to throw into soups.
- Drink a glass of orange juice or low-sodium vegetable juice.
- Add grapes or diced apples or pears to salads.
- Double your serving size of veggies at dinner.
- Add jarred roasted red peppers to your sandwich.
- Dip raw peppers, carrots, celery or snap peas in hummus for a refreshing snack.
- Munch on sweet cherry tomatoes with your lunch.

So get into the habit of adding more fruits and veggies to your daily meal plan. It's never too late to start protecting your health.

Greg Breining contributed to this report.