

Why Fruits and Vegetables Are Vital

By Melanie Winderlich

If we are what we eat, then many of us must be tripping all over the place due to a lack of balance. That's because the average American eats about three servings of fruits and vegetables per day — a stark contrast to the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) new guidelines stating that we should be eating 5 to 13 servings of nature's best, depending on the number of calories you need. So if we want to grow to be strong like Popeye, why can't we just down some supplements instead of devouring a pile of spinach?

Nutrients in fresh fruits and vegetables work together. *Kristine Wallerius Cuthrell, MPH, RD, a research nutritionist and senior project coordinator for Hawaii Foods at the Center on the Family at University of Hawaii at Manoa, says that in the past five to 10 years, many large research studies have found that vitamin supplements don't provide the benefits that foods do.*

Fruits and vegetables may prevent many illnesses. *Eating fruits and vegetables may reduce your risk of cardiovascular diseases, stroke, type 2 diabetes, and even some forms of cancer. The Nurses' Health Study and Health Professionals Follow-up Study examined nearly 110,000 people over the course of 14 years. Part of the study revealed that the more fruits and vegetables people ate daily, the less chance they would develop cardiovascular diseases.*

Fruits and vegetables are great for watching your weight. *They're low in fat and calories, and loaded with fiber and water, which create a feeling of fullness. This is particularly helpful for dieters who want more filling calories. Plus, that fiber helps keep you "regular."*

Fruits and Vegetables: Get Your Fill

When adding fruits and vegetables to your diet, remember that variety is the spice of life. It's important to eat produce of various colors because each fruit or vegetable offers a different nutrient — think of it as nutritional cross-training. Trying new foods can be exciting, and be sure to sample every color in the produce rainbow.

The right number of servings of fruits and vegetables for you all depends on your daily caloric intake needs. A good way to find out how many servings you should be eating is by using the CDC's online serving calculator. Or make things even simpler by eating a fruit or vegetable at every meal and snack.

Don't let season, accessibility, or cost affect your fruit- and vegetable-friendly diet. If finding fresh produce is difficult, choose frozen, canned (low-sodium), or dried varieties. Also, 100 percent juice counts toward your servings, though it doesn't offer the full fiber of whole fruit.