

Eat More Fruits, Veggies, and Grains for Healthy Aging

adapted from "Eating Well as You Get Older" at <http://nihseniorhealth.gov>

As we age, our need for calories declines; however, our need for nutrients such as vitamins and minerals does not. Fruits, vegetables, and grains contain lots of vitamins, minerals, fiber, and other substances important for good health. Most of these foods are low in fat and calories, and have no cholesterol. They are also good sources of fiber, and eating more fiber may help with digestion and constipation and may lower cholesterol and blood sugar. Frozen, canned, and dried fruits and vegetables can be easier to chew while still providing the necessary fiber and nutrients.

Fruits, vegetables, and grains and beans also give your body natural phytochemicals such as beta-carotene, lutein and lycopene. Like vitamins, minerals, and fiber, phytochemicals may promote good health and reduce the risk of heart disease, diabetes, and some cancers. Research is underway to learn more about these natural compounds.

Fruits, vegetables, and grains also contain antioxidants. Antioxidants are substances that may protect cells in the body from the damage caused by oxidation. They include vitamin C, vitamin E, and other substances. Antioxidants are thought to promote health and to possibly reduce the risk of certain cancers and other diseases.

Colorful fruits and vegetables are the best dietary sources of antioxidants. Deeply and brightly colored fruits and vegetables, such as spinach, carrots, red bell peppers, and tomatoes, have the highest amounts of these healthy substances. Antioxidant supplements may not provide the same health benefits as foods.

Fruits

Eat a variety of fresh, frozen, canned, or dried fruits every day. To make sure you get the benefit of the natural fiber in fruits, you should eat most of your fruits whole rather than as juice. Fruits may be purchased fresh, canned, frozen, or dried and may be eaten whole, cut-up, or pureed.



Vegetables

Also, eat a variety of vegetables every day. Aim for lots of color on your plate as a way to get the widest variety possible each day. Broccoli, spinach, turnip and collard greens, and other dark leafy greens are good choices. You might also choose orange vegetables, such as carrots, sweet potatoes, pumpkin, or winter squash. Vegetables may be purchased raw or cooked, frozen, canned, or dried/dehydrated. They may be eaten whole, cut-up, or mashed.



Whole Grains

Foods made from grains are a major source of energy and fiber. Include grains in your diet every day. Any food made from wheat, rice, oats, cornmeal, barley, or another cereal grain is a grain product. Grains fall into two main categories: whole and refined. When choosing grain foods, try to "make half your grains whole"; in other words, at least half of the cereals, breads, crackers, and pastas you eat should be made from whole grains. For example, you might try whole wheat pasta instead of regular pasta or use brown rice in a casserole in place of white rice.



Whole grains are better sources of fiber and nutrients than refined grains, such as white flour or white rice. Refined grains have had both the bran and germ removed and don't have as much fiber or as many nutrients as whole grains. Most refined grains are enriched, with some B vitamins and iron added back in after processing. However, fiber is not replaced.

Whole-grain foods, such as whole-wheat bread, are made with the entire seed of a plant, including the bran, the germ, and the endosperm. Together, they provide lots of vitamins, minerals, antioxidants, healthy fat, carbohydrates, and fiber.

When you buy a grain food such as cereal or bread, check the ingredient list on the package to see that the main ingredients include a whole grain. Look for "whole wheat" or "whole oats" rather than just "wheat" or "oats."

Other whole grains include whole rye, whole-grain corn, bulgur wheat, graham flour, oatmeal, brown rice, and wild rice. Products labeled "multi-grain," "stone-ground," "100% wheat," "cracked wheat," "seven-grain," and "bran" are not always whole-grain foods. You can compare the fiber content in the Nutrition Facts label on packages of bread and other grain products to help identify the best choices.

For more information on fruits and vegetables, visit the CDC website, <http://www.fruitsandveggiesmatter.gov/>

