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Why You Should Eat More Fruits, Vegetables

Choices you make each day can affect your risk for cancer. The American Cancer Society says that if you do not smoke, choosing to eat a healthful diet and to be physically active are the most important things you can do to reduce your risk for many types of cancer .

Several studies have found that diets rich in fruits and vegetables help prevent cancer. "People with high fruit and vegetable intakes have about half the risk of cancer as people with low intakes," says Peter Greenwald, M.D., Dr. P.H., director of the National Cancer Institute's (NCI) Division of Cancer Prevention and Control in Washington, DC.

"Specifically, the evidence indicates that higher intakes of fruits and vegetables are associated with a decreased risk of developing esophagus, oral-cavity, stomach, colon, rectum, lung and larynx cancers," Greenwald says. In response, the NCI and the USDA recommends eating 5 cups of fruits, vegetables and juices every day.

The NCI defines a serving as one medium fruit, 6 ounces of 100 percent fruit or vegetable juice, 1/2 cup cooked or raw vegetables or fruit, one cup of raw leafy vegetables or 1/4 cup dried fruit. Even eating just one extra serving of fruits and vegetables each day can help you avoid a dietary deficit.

Upping your intake

Try to eat at least 5 cups a day of fruits and vegetables, especially those with the most color, which is an indication of high nutrient content. These tips can help you increase your intake:

Have a daily fruit snack.

Tuck a banana, apple, orange, some raisins or other dried fruit in your briefcase for a midafternoon snack.

Use sliced fresh fruit as a topping for pancakes, waffles and fresh yogurt.

Substitute chopped vegetables for some of the meat in your recipes.

For example: Add carrots, celery and green and red peppers to meatloaf; mushrooms and spinach to lasagna; and celery, zucchini and yellow squash to spaghetti sauce.

Drink a glass of 100 percent fruit juice with your meals.

Top hot or cold cereal with sliced bananas, fresh berries, raisins or other fruit.

Top lettuce-leaf salads with generous amounts of tomato, cucumber, celery and mushroom slices, onions, beets, radishes, green peppers, broccoli, shredded carrots, bean sprouts or fresh fruit.

Add chopped green, yellow or red peppers; broccoli; celery; onions; and cherry tomatoes to rice and pasta salads.

Desserts with fresh fruit

Serve fresh-fruit desserts--poached pears, baked apples or fresh-fruit-topped angel food cake.

Double the amount of vegetables called for in soups, stews and casseroles.

Once or twice a week, serve a vegetarian main course such as hearty vegetable soup, meatless chili made with tomatoes and beans, vegetarian burritos or pasta topped with tomato, herb and vegetable sauce.

To keep your interest high, add one new fruit or vegetable to your diet every month. Some fruits you may not be eating: mangoes, papayas, dates, figs, apricots, pineapples, cranberries and rhubarb. Vegetables that shouldn't be overlooked: winter, acorn and butternut squash; snow peas; kale; bok choy; turnip; eggplant; endive; and collard and mustard greens.

Use your imagination. Top baked potatoes with shredded carrots instead of shredded cheese; mix chopped grapes, apples and raisins into chicken or tuna salad; add grated or pureed carrots, zucchini, pumpkin, bananas or berries to muffins and breads.

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