How to Increase Fruits and Vegetables

We know eating more fruits and veggies is good for us regardless of production method...but how do we do it?

October 26, 2018 By Danielle Penick

We always hear about eating more produce, and it's a fact worth repeating: Eating more fruits and vegetables helps with preventing chronic disease. But most of us are not eating enough, putting us more at risk for things like diabetes, high cholesterol, and even cancer. The Centers of Disease Control finds that only one in ten Americans are eating their recommended 5 servings a day. We know we should eat more, but many of us are overwhelmed with where to start. Do I have to change my entire way of eating? Or is eating this way is going to be expensive? What recipes do I use? What if I budget for extra produce and don't like it? To what if it goes bad before I eat it? Some of us even get anxious starting if they have a spouse or family who doesn't eat the same way. These are all reasonable concerns and I hear them from many of my patients and friends. But what if I told you it doesn't have to be a huge uphill battle to eat better?

The simplest place to start is by enhancing what you are already eating. For example if you eat eggs at breakfast, just add veggies to an omelet or if you eat yogurt, cereal, or oatmeal, then add fruit to it. If you like to snack, try snacking on produce with hummus, cheese, or peanut butter etc. If getting your family on board with your new way of eating is a barrier, this is one way to make the change without drastically changing what your family is eating. They can even opt out of adding extra produce to their diets if they are extremely resistant to making changes. You can add veggies to your pizza, pasta, or casseroles, but your family can take them out or not add them to their plates (but who knows you might even inspire them to try it). You can also add fruit to ice cream, salads, pancakes, muffins, etc. Or try at meatless Monday and opt for veggies in place of meat. For example veggie tacos or veggie fajitas without the animal protein.

Some people like another method of just trying one new produce item per week. Meaning if you're at the store, grab something you have never tried or seen before and take it home. It may inspire you to try a new recipe or could be a good conversation piece at home. You may learn more about nutrition or another culture depending on the origin of the fruit or vegetable you choose.

Another consideration if you are worried about your produce going bad is to buy frozen produce or even canned produce (soaked in light syrup, water, or light salt in place of the heavy syrup or high salt options). Keep these on stock at home and use them at your convenience—this will ensure you don't have to worry about them spoiling. Frozen is a great option for steaming veggies as well since you can toss them in the microwave or stove.

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Once you decide to make any changes it's also important to look at your eating environment and what surrounds you. Just being around more produce in your home or at your work desk, increases the likelihood you will eat it. For example people who have a fruit bowl on their countertops or tables are more likely to eat fruit. If you have bags of sliced veggies in containers or baggies you are more likely to eat these as a snack than not. Or having dried fruit, apples, and bananas at your desk.

Many people feel less overwhelmed to just start by eating just one extra serving of produce each day and once this becomes the norm, then you can add another serving. Over time the goal is to follow the American Institute of Cancer Research's New American Plate method by filling 2/3 of your plate with plant based foods. Of note, this also includes beans, nuts, seeds, and whole grains. A good goal is to aim for 1/2 of your plate with fruits and veggies and the other 1/3 for grains. With time you will be able to do this without thinking much about it.

One of the biggest barriers I hear about is perceived cost of produce. When you break it down you might be able to eat up to 3 servings of produce items for under $2 per day by looking at what's on sale at the store or having frozen produce on hand. Check out conventional production methods as well since they are often cheaper than organic. If you opt for this choice just know that you will not be impacting your health or nutritional value by swapping for the cheaper option. I've written about this topic before, and the evidence has shown that neither production method is superior for health or nutritional value. If you have the time and resources growing your own

supplemental garden may also be something you can look into. Eating in season can also help with reducing the cost of produce.

Try a variety of all colors and eating cooked and raw fruits and veggies. Each color represents a different vitamin or mineral and eating cooked produce items can enhance the amount of some nutrients, while it can also decrease the amount of other nutrients. For example, a raw tomato is high in vitamin C, but much of it is lost when you cook the tomato. However, lycopene is enhanced when it's cooked. So it's best to eat a variety of all colors and cooking methods. If you're looking for more meal planning ideas for fruits and veggies, I recommend checking out Eating Well for ideas.

While it's important to focus on a balanced diet, this way of eating may not be right for everyone while going through cancer treatment. If you are struggling to keep weight on or have swallowing issues, then this might be best reserved for a later time when weight loss is not of concern. Sometimes the goal is simply eating adequate calories and it may not include eating a lot of produce since they are low in calories if you can't each much. This way of eating is good for helping to prevent cancer recurrence once treatment is completed or if you are well nourished. There's no perfect way to eat more produce, but to succeed in your journey you just have to take that first step!

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