

Eat More Fruits and Vegetables! National Nutrition Month is a Good Time to Start

Making healthier food choices is always a good idea. With March being National Nutrition Month, now is a good time to think about making healthy food choices an everyday event. One way to do that, is to remember to “put your best fork forward” which is the theme of National Nutrition Month this year. Even small changes in your eating habits and food choices can help you make strides in improving your health overall.

The U. S. Dietary Guidelines recommends that people make half their plate fruits and vegetables. That includes eating whole fruits – fresh, frozen, dried or canned in 100 percent juice and eating fresh, dozen or canned vegetables either raw steamed, sautéed or roasted. Make sure to include dark green, red and orange vegetables as well as legumes such as beans and peas and starchy and other vegetables.

People should eat more fruits and vegetables because they are major contributors of several nutrients under-consumed in the U. S. – vitamins A, C, and K, potassium, fiber and magnesium, according to the Produce for Better Health Foundation. Fruits and vegetables are also associated with reduced risk of many chronic diseases such as obesity, heart disease, high blood pressure and Type 2 diabetes.

Only one out of 10 Americans meets the recommended daily allowance of fruits and vegetables, according to a 2015 study by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Less than 9 percent of Americans eat two to three cups of vegetables daily while 13 percent were reported to eat one and a half to two cups of fruit daily, the study found.

One way to increase your fruit and vegetable intake is to be creative in how you prepare them. The Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics offers the following suggestions: Use vegetables like broccoli, spinach, green peppers, tomatoes, mushrooms and zucchini as pizza toppings.

- Make a breakfast smoothie with low-fat milk, frozen strawberries and a banana.
- Make a veggie wrap with roasted vegetables and low-fat cheese rolled in a whole-wheat tortilla.
- Grill colorful vegetable kabobs packed with tomatoes, green and red peppers, mushrooms and onions.
- Add color to salads with baby carrots, grape tomatoes, spinach leaves, apples or mandarin oranges.
- Keep cut vegetables handy for a midafternoon snack, side dishes, lunch box additions or a quick nibble while waiting for dinner. Include red, green or yellow peppers, broccoli or cauliflower florets, carrots, celery sticks, cucumbers, snap peas or whole radishes.
- Keep a bowl of fresh whole fruit in the center of your kitchen or dining table.
- Get saucy with fruit. Puree apples, peaches or pears in a blender for a thick, sweet sauce on grilled or broiled seafood or poultry or on pancakes, French toast or waffles.
- Turn any omelet into a hearty meal with broccoli, squash, carrots, peppers, tomatoes or onions with low-fat sharp cheddar cheese.
- Add pizzazz to sandwiches with sliced pineapple, apple, peppers, cucumber and tomato as fillings.

- Make a habit of adding fruit to your morning cereal, oatmeal, yogurt or waffle.
- Top a baked potato with beans, salsa or broccoli and low-fat cheese.
- Add grated, shredded or chopped vegetables such as zucchini, spinach and carrots to lasagna, meat loaf, mashed potatoes, pasta sauce, and rice dishes.
- Make fruit your dessert. Slice a banana lengthwise and top with a scoop or low-fat frozen yogurt. Sprinkle with a tablespoon of chopped nuts.
- Stock your freezer with frozen vegetables to steam or stir-fry for a quick side dish.
- Cook fruit on the grill. Make kabobs with pineapple, peaches and banana. Grill on low heat until the fruit is hot and slightly golden.

Green Bean and Squash Salad

Salad

2 cups fresh green beans, trimmed and cut into bite size pieces

2 cups yellow squash, sliced and chopped

½ pint grape tomatoes

¾ cups red onion, finely sliced

¼ cup reduced fat feta cheese, crumbled

Dressing

2 tablespoons olive oil

¼ cup lime juice, fresh squeezed

¼ cup fresh basil, washed and chopped

1 teaspoon salt

¼ teaspoon pepper

Mix salad ingredients together. Combine dressing ingredients and pour over vegetables and mix well. Chill in the refrigerator 30 minutes before serving. Servings: 8.