

Nutrition Matters

Nutrition Services, Community and Health Services

Eat more vegetables and fruit

Do you remember your mother saying “eat your vegetables and fruit - they’re good for you?” Well, she was right!



Consuming vegetables and fruit is an important way to reduce the risk of disease and maximize good health. *Eating Well with Canada’s Food Guide* recommends the following Food Guide Servings of vegetables and fruit each day:

Age in years	Children			Teens		Adults			
	2-3	4-8	9-13	14-18		19-50		51+	
Gender	Girls and Boys			Females	Males	Females	Males	Females	Males
Recommended number of Food Guide Servings a day	4	5	6	7	8	7-8	8-10	7	7

Read on to learn more about the importance of vegetables and fruit to your health and how to add more of these super foods into your diet.

Plant foods benefit your health

Vegetables and fruit provide many vitamins and minerals that your body needs to be healthy.

Vitamin A (beta-carotene) helps cells reproduce normally and has an important role in vision and maintaining healthy skin and hair. Beta-carotene is found in red, yellow and orange vegetables and fruit.

B-vitamins (B₁, B₂, B₃, B₆) support energy metabolism, help form red blood cells and keep the nervous system healthy. Sources of B-vitamins include green vegetables, potatoes and bananas.



Vitamin C protects our cells and helps strengthen the immune system. Vitamin C also aids in iron absorption. It is found in many vegetables and fruit including oranges, kiwi, strawberries, tomatoes and red and green peppers.

Calcium is needed for strong, healthy bones and teeth. It also helps muscles and nerves to work properly. Broccoli, turnip greens, bok choy and kale contain calcium.

Folate is very important for women before pregnancy as it helps lower the risk for birth defects. Folate may also help reduce the risk for heart disease and some types of cancer. Green leafy vegetables, asparagus, beets, broccoli and oranges are sources of folate.

Vitamin K is essential for blood clotting. Green leafy vegetables and broccoli contain Vitamin K.

Iron helps red blood cells carry oxygen throughout the body. It can be found in spinach, dried apricots and raisins.

Magnesium plays many roles in the body and helps to build and maintain strong bones. Green leafy vegetables contain magnesium.

Potassium plays a key role in blood pressure control. Potassium is found in bananas, mangoes and most vegetables.

Zinc is involved in several key activities in the body including protein and carbohydrate metabolism and wound healing. Zinc is found in peas, kiwi, and potatoes.

Fill up on fibre

Vegetables and fruit are rich sources of fibre. Fibre benefits your health in many ways:

- Lowers blood cholesterol
- Helps control blood sugar
- Promotes bowel health and prevents constipation
- Helps to maintain a healthy body weight

Think colour!

In addition to essential vitamins, minerals and fibre, vegetables and fruit also contain phytochemicals. Phytochemicals are naturally occurring plant chemicals that help fight disease and promote good health. Phytochemicals contribute to the bright colours of vegetables and fruit. Many phytochemicals function as antioxidants, which help protect the body cells from damage. Hundreds of phytochemicals have already been identified and more remain to be discovered. Remember to eat a variety of brightly coloured vegetables and fruit each day. Below are some examples of phytochemicals found in vegetables and fruit.



Colour	Phytochemicals	Potential health benefits	Food sources
Red/bright pink	Lycopene	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Powerful antioxidant to fight heart disease and some types of cancer (e.g., prostate cancer) 	Tomatoes, red and pink grapefruit, papaya, guava and processed tomato products such as juice and sauce
	Anthocyanins	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reduce the risk of heart disease and some types of cancer Act as an anti-inflammatory Healthy aging 	Strawberries, raspberries and beets
Orange/yellow	Beta carotene and Bioflavonoids	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reduce the risk of developing some types of cancer and heart disease Healthy vision Healthy immune system Slow down the aging process 	Mangos, carrots, squash, peaches, sweet potato, oranges, lemons, pineapple, yellow and orange peppers and apricots
Green	Lutein	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A powerful antioxidant that has a role in promoting good vision 	Kale, romaine lettuce, peas, asparagus, kiwi and honeydew melon
	Indoles and Isothiocyanates	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> May help protect against developing certain cancers (e.g., breast and prostate) 	Green cruciferous vegetables such as broccoli, cabbage, bok choy and brussel sprouts
Blue/purple	Phenolics and Anthocyanins	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reduce the risk of developing heart disease and some types of cancers Memory function Healthy aging 	Blackberries, blueberries, purple grapes, figs, prunes, raisins and eggplant
White	Allicin and Polyphenols	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reduce the risk of heart disease Lower blood pressure Lower blood cholesterol 	Garlic, onions, chives, bananas, lychees, cauliflower, potato and leeks

What about supplements?

Although there are many supplements containing phytochemicals, research suggests that supplements do not provide the same health benefits as food for several reasons:

- The supplement form of the protective factors may be different than what is found in the food
- There may be additional unidentified beneficial substances in food
- It is still unknown whether the health benefits come from one phytochemical or if it is a combination of several of them working together

The bottom line is to focus on food. The benefits of phytochemicals can be achieved by eating the recommended servings of vegetables and fruit every day.

Organic produce

The term organic refers to the processes and methods used to farm. Organic farming avoids the use of chemicals, synthetic pesticides, irradiation and genetic modification.

People often choose organic vegetables and fruit because they believe organic food is healthier, more environmentally friendly or tastes better. Both organic and conventional (regular) produce are excellent sources of essential nutrients – regardless of how they are grown.

Organic or regular produce? It's all about personal choice. What's most important is that you are getting your recommended Food Guide Servings of vegetables and fruit each day!

Cleaning your vegetables and fruit:

- Wash all vegetables and fruit with cool running water. It is not recommended to use soap or detergent
- A clean produce brush can be used to scrub firm produce such as watermelon, oranges, cantaloupes and vegetables and fruit that will be eaten with the peel or skin
- Discard outer leaves of leafy vegetables such as lettuce and cabbage



Buy local – buy fresh

Local produce includes the foods picked or purchased at local farms or farmers' markets, as well as any Ontario-grown produce purchased at the grocery store. Buying locally grown produce has many benefits:

- The produce is fresher and better tasting
- Local produce maintains a higher nutritional value than its imported counterpart because there are minimal losses through transportation
- More food dollars remain in the local community
- Minimal processing, packaging and transporting are friendly to the environment

Buy produce at farmers' markets and pick-your-own farms whenever possible. Buy large quantities in season and freeze or preserve for future use.

Every year, the York Region Farm Fresh Association releases *York Region Farm Fresh Guide*, a map and guide to fresh local produce from York Region farms and farmers' markets. You can get the *York Region Farm Fresh Guide* by visiting www.yorktourism.com or by contacting York Region's *Health Connection* at 1-800-361-5653.

Fresh, frozen, canned or dried – The choice is yours!

Fresh, frozen, canned and dried vegetables and fruit have similar nutritional content but they do have their own benefits and drawbacks. Here are some points to consider:

Fresh vegetables and fruit often have the best flavour and texture. For quality, value and to support your farming community, your best bet is seasonal local produce.

Frozen vegetables and fruit offer a convenient and nutritious choice.

Keep a bag in your freezer for when you need to prepare a quick meal or snack. Commercially frozen produce is picked at peak ripeness and is quickly frozen so its nutritional value is similar to fresh produce.

Canned vegetables and fruit are convenient although the flavour is not as authentic as fresh or frozen. Canned vegetables may be high in salt, so choose lower salt varieties when possible.

You can also drain and rinse the vegetables to reduce the salt content. Canned fruit may be high in sugar, so choose fruit that has been canned in its own juices.

Dried fruit such as raisins, apricots, apples and mangoes are convenient and delicious. Dried vegetables such as sun-dried tomatoes, peas and bell peppers are versatile and can be added to soups, casseroles and omelettes.

How to increase your vegetable and fruit intake

It may be easier than you think to get the daily servings of vegetables and fruit that are recommended in *Eating Well with Canada's Food Guide*.



Tips for the entire family

- ✓ Add vegetables and fruit to the food you already eat
 - Add fresh or dried fruit to your cereal
 - Enjoy pancakes with fresh or frozen berries
 - Add vegetables to pasta dishes
 - Load up your sandwiches with vegetables
 - Add fresh or canned fruit to yogurt
 - Add your own fresh or frozen vegetables to canned and packaged soups
- ✓ Try something new!
 - Have a fruit smoothie for breakfast
 - Try a vegetable dip such as roasted red pepper or babaganoush (eggplant)
 - Buy a vegetable or fruit you have never tried
 - Have a spinach salad with orange segments or fresh strawberries
 - Add grated vegetables to your casseroles, soups, chili or main dish
- ✓ Make vegetables and fruit easy and accessible to the whole family by having pre-washed cut up raw vegetables and fruit on hand
- ✓ Include a vegetable or fruit at all meals and snacks
- ✓ Involve the whole family
 - Parents and caregivers need to act as role models and eat a variety of vegetables and fruit
 - Involve your child in growing, buying and preparing vegetables. Children will take more interest if they have helped to grow or prepare a food item
 - Pick-your-own seasonal vegetable and fruit – your kids will love it! And you can freeze or make preserves with extras

How much is one Food Guide Serving?

- 1 medium vegetable or fruit
- ½ cup (125 mL) of 100% fruit or vegetable juice
- ½ cup (125 mL) of chopped vegetables or fruit (fresh, frozen or canned)
- 1 cup (250 mL) raw leafy greens
- ¼ cup (60 mL) dried fruit



How does juice fit in?

Products labelled **100% juice, 100% fruit juice, 100% pure juice, 100% juice from concentrate and (name of fruit) juice** are made from real juice and a ½ cup (125 mL) serving equals one Food Guide Serving of vegetables and fruit.

Products labelled **fruit drink, beverage, punch, cocktail or –ade** are mostly sugar and water and are not equal to a serving of vegetables and fruit.

Your best choice is to eat whole fruit (fresh, frozen or canned) more often than drinking fruit juice. Although fruit juice contains many vitamins and minerals, fruit juices contain very little fibre and are less filling than whole fruit.

For more information on fruit juices, contact York Region's *Health Connection* at 1-800-361-5653 for your copy of *The ABC's of fruit juice* fact sheet.