
Fruit and vegetables

Summary

- Fruits and vegetables contain important vitamins, minerals and plant chemicals. They also contain fibre.
 - There are many varieties of fruit and vegetables available and many ways to prepare, cook and serve them.
 - A diet high in fruit and vegetables can help protect you against cancer, diabetes and heart disease.
 - Eat five kinds of vegetable and two kinds of fruit every day for good health.
 - Most Australians do not eat enough fruit and vegetables.
 - When buying and serving fruit and vegetables, aim for variety to get the most nutrients and appeal.
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Fruit and vegetables should be an important part of your daily diet. They are naturally good and contain vitamins and minerals that can help to keep you healthy. They can also help protect against some diseases.

Most Australians will benefit from eating more fruit and vegetables as part of a well-balanced, regular diet and a healthy, active lifestyle. There are many varieties of fruit and vegetables available and many ways to prepare, cook and serve them.

You should eat at least five serves of vegetables and two serves of fruit each day. Choose different colours and varieties.

A serve of vegetables is about one cup of raw salad vegetables or 1/2 cup of cooked.

A serve of fruit is about one medium piece, 2 small pieces or 1 cup canned (no added sugar).

Vitamins and minerals in fruit and vegetables

Fruits and vegetables contain many vitamins and minerals that are good for your health. These include vitamins A (beta-carotene), C and E, magnesium, zinc, phosphorous and folic acid. Folic acid may reduce blood levels of homocysteine, a substance that may be a risk factor for coronary heart disease.

Fruit and vegetables for good health

Fruits and vegetables are low in fat, salt and sugar. They are a good source of dietary fibre. As part of a well-balanced, regular diet and a healthy, active lifestyle, a high intake of fruit and vegetables can help you to:

- Reduce obesity and maintain a **healthy weight**
- Lower your **cholesterol**
- Lower your **blood pressure**.

Fruit and vegetables and protection against diseases

Vegetables and fruit contain phytochemicals, or plant chemicals. These biologically active substances can help to protect you from some diseases. Scientific research shows that if you regularly eat lots of fruit and vegetables, you have a lower risk of:

- Type 2 **diabetes**
- **Stroke**
- **Heart (cardiovascular) disease** – when fruits and vegetables are eaten as food, not taken as supplements
- **Cancer** – some forms of cancer, later in life
- High blood pressure (**hypertension**).

Types of fruit

Fruit is the sweet, fleshy, edible part of a plant. It generally contains seeds. Fruits are usually eaten raw, although some varieties can be cooked. They come in a wide variety of colours, shapes and flavours. Common types of fruits that are readily available include:

- **Apples** and **pears**
- Citrus – **oranges**, **grapefruits**, **mandarins** and **limes**
- Stone fruit – **nectarines**, **apricots**, **peaches** and **plums**
- Tropical and exotic – **bananas** and **mangoes**
- Berries – **strawberries**, **raspberries**, **blueberries**, **kiwifruit** and **passionfruit**
- Melons – **watermelons**, **rockmelons** and **honeydew melons**
- **Tomatoes** and **avocados**.

Types of vegetables

Vegetables are available in many varieties and can be classified into biological groups or 'families', including:

- Leafy green – **lettuce**, **spinach** and **silverbeet**
- Cruciferous – **cabbage**, **cauliflower**, **Brussels sprouts** and **broccoli**
- Marrow – **pumpkin**, **cucumber** and **zucchini**
- Root – **potato**, **sweet potato** and yam
- Edible plant stem – **celery** and **asparagus**
- Allium – **onion**, **garlic** and **shallot**.

Legumes

Legumes or pulses contain nutrients that are especially valuable. Legumes need to be cooked before they are eaten – this improves their nutritional quality, aids digestion and eliminates any harmful toxins. Legumes come in many forms including:

- Soy products – **tofu** (bean curd) and **soybeans**
- Legume flours – chickpea flour (besan), lentil flour and soy flour
- Dried beans and peas – haricot beans, red kidney beans, chickpeas and **lentils**
- Fresh beans and peas – **green peas**, green **beans**, butter beans, broad beans and snow **peas**.

Colours of fruits and vegetables

You will get the most health benefits and protection against disease if you eat a wide variety of fruits and

vegetables. The National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) *Australian dietary guidelines* recommend that adults eat at least five kinds of vegetable and two kinds of fruit every day.

Foods of similar colours generally contain similar protective compounds. Try to eat a rainbow of colourful fruits and vegetables every day to get the full range of health benefits. For example:

- Red foods – like tomatoes and watermelon. These contain lycopene, which is thought to be important for fighting prostate cancer and heart disease
- Green vegetables – like spinach and kale. These contain lutein and zeaxanthin, which may help protect against age-related eye disease
- Blue and purple foods – like blueberries and eggplant. These contain anthocyanins, which may help protect the body from cancer
- White foods – like cauliflower. These contain sulforaphane and may also help protect against some cancers.

Selecting fruits and vegetables

To maximise nutrients and appeal, buy and serve different types of fruit and vegetables. Try to buy fruits and vegetables that are in season, and choose for freshness and quality. You should:

- Eat with the seasons – this is nature's way of making sure our bodies get a healthy mix of nutrients and plant chemicals
- Try something new – try new recipes and buy new fruit or vegetables as part of your weekly shopping
- Let colours guide you – get different combinations of nutrients by putting a 'rainbow' of colours (green, white, yellow–orange, blue–purple, red) on your plate.

Our **ingredients profiles** provide more information on fruits and vegetables.

Fruit and vegetable serving suggestions for your family's health

Vegetables and fruit are a handy snack food and are easily carried to work or school. Include them in everyone's meals and snacks for a healthy, well-balanced diet. Some suggestions include:

- Keep snack-size fruit and vegetable portions easily accessible in your fridge.
- Keep fresh fruit on the bench or table.
- Add fruit and vegetables to your favourite family recipes or as additions to your usual menus.
- Use the colour and texture of a variety of fruit and vegetables to add interest to your meals.
- Think up new ways to serve fruits and vegetables.

Some simple ways to serve fruits and vegetables include:

- fruit and vegetable salads
- vegetable or meat-and-vegetable stir-fries
- raw fruit and vegetables
- vegetable soups
- snack pack, stewed or canned fruits or dried fruits.

Limit fruit juice, as it does not contain the same amount of nutrients as fresh fruit. It also contains a lot of sugars. These sugars are not necessarily good for your health, even though they are 'natural'. Instead, have a drink of water and a serve of fruit.

Preparation and cooking of fruit and vegetables

Vegetables are often cooked, although some kinds are eaten raw. Cooking and processing can damage some nutrients and phytochemicals in plant foods.

Suggestions to get the best out of your fruit and vegetables include:

- Eat raw vegetables and fruits if possible.
- Try fruit or vegetables pureed into smoothies.

- Use a sharp knife to cut fresh fruits to avoid bruising.
- Cut off only the inedible parts of vegetables – sometimes the best nutrients are found in the skin, just below the skin or in the leaves.
- Use stir-fry, grill, microwave, bake or steam methods with non-stick cookware and mono-unsaturated oils.
- Do not overcook, to reduce nutrient loss.
- Serve meals with vegetable pestos, salsas, chutneys and vinegars in place of sour cream, butter and creamy sauces.

Some nutrients such as carotenoids may actually be increased if food is cooked. For example, tomato has more carotenoids, especially lycopene, when it is cooked – a good reason to prepare fruits and vegetables in a variety of ways.

Once you've prepared and cooked your vegetables and fruit, spend some time on presentation. People are more likely to enjoy a meal if it's full of variety and visually appealing, as well as tasty. Sit at the table to eat and enjoy your food without distractions like television.

Daily allowances of fruit and vegetables

Different fruits and vegetables contain different nutrients. The *Australian dietary guidelines* recommend that adults eat at least five kinds of vegetable and two kinds of fruit every day. A national nutrition survey conducted by the Australian Government showed that Australians of all ages do not eat enough vegetables and fruit.

Children have a smaller stomach capacity and higher energy needs than adults. They cannot eat the same serving sizes as adults. However, you should encourage your children to eat a variety of fruits and vegetables. By eating well, your children will have the energy they need to play, concentrate better, learn, sleep better and build stronger teeth and bones. Building good habits in their early years can also provide the protection of a healthy diet throughout their lives.

The *Australian dietary guidelines* have recommendations on how many vegetables and fruits adults, children and adolescents of different ages require.

Where to get help

- Your doctor (GP)
- **Maternal and child health services**
- Your local fresh food retailer
- **Heart Foundation of Australia** Tel. (03) 9329 8511
- **Dietitians Association of Australia** Tel. 1800 812 942

This page has been produced in consultation with and approved by:

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