

Why you should eat more fruits and vegetables

It can be tempting to grab a donut or candy bar when your body is craving a snack. But it can be just as quick and satisfying to grab a juicy apple or a bag of crunchy carrots – and your body and your health will be better for it.

The benefits of consuming at least 5 servings of fruits and vegetables each day are enormous, and it may be easier than you think to achieve this goal.

A study in the October 6, 1999, issue of *JAMA* reports that people who

consumed at least 5 servings of fruits and vegetables daily were at more than 30% lower risk of having a stroke, compared with people who consumed the lowest amount of fruits and vegetables daily. Fruits and vegetables showing the strongest protective effect against stroke include vegetables in the cabbage family (eg, bok choy, broccoli, brussels sprouts, cabbage, collards, cauliflower), green leafy vegetables, citrus fruits, and citrus fruit juices.

HEALTHY THINGS FROM FRUITS AND VEGETABLES:

Antioxidants – Substances that protect against cell damage by guarding the cell from oxygen free radicals. Free radicals are created when the body burns oxygen, which it needs to function properly. Free radicals cause **oxidation** (cell damage) that may lead to health problems, such as cancer, artery and heart disease, cataracts, and arthritis. Good sources of antioxidant vitamins are foods containing beta carotene and vitamins C and E.

Beta carotene – A pigment found in orange vegetables and fruits, which the body converts to vitamin A. It is one of the antioxidant vitamins, which potentially protect against cancer and the degenerative aspects of aging.

Fiber – Components of plants (such as fruits, vegetables, and grains) that the body cannot digest. It aids in maintaining normal bowel function.

Folate (or folic acid) – One of the B vitamins that is essential for making new, healthy body cells and reduces the risk of birth defects in pregnant women.

Potassium – A mineral that helps regulate fluids and mineral balance in and out of body cells and maintains normal blood pressure and helps muscles contract.

Vitamin A – Helps the eyes see normally in the dark, promotes cell growth, and protects against infection.

Vitamin C (or ascorbic acid) – Helps body cells grow and stay healthy, including those in bones, teeth, gums, ligaments, and blood vessels. It also helps the body's response to infection and stress.

SOURCES:



cabbage, carrots, brussels sprouts

strawberries, citrus fruits and juices, green leafy vegetables, whole-grain breads, beans

bananas, okra, oranges, tomatoes, bell peppers

liver, fish oil, eggs, carrots, milk fortified with vitamin A

citrus fruits, strawberries, kiwi, cantaloupe, red or green peppers, broccoli, brussels sprouts

HEALTH BENEFITS OF FRUITS AND VEGETABLES:

- Low in calories, fat, and cholesterol
- High in vitamins (such as vitamins A and C), minerals, and fiber
- A diet low in fat, saturated fat, and cholesterol that contains plenty of fruits and vegetables as well as whole-grain breads and cereals can reduce the risk of heart disease and cancer

HOW MUCH DO YOU NEED?

- The U.S. government's Dietary Guidelines for Americans recommends 5 to 9 servings of fruits and vegetables per day. A serving of fruits or vegetables consists of:
 - 1 medium fruit or 1/2 cup of small or cut-up fruit
 - 3/4 cup (or 6 ounces) of 100% fruit juice
 - 1/4 cup dried fruit
 - 1/2 cup raw or cooked vegetables
 - 1 cup of raw, leafy vegetables (such as lettuce or spinach)
 - 1/2 cup cooked beans or peas

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

- National Cancer Institute Cancer Information Service "5 A Day – For Better Health" Program 800/4-CANCER 800/332-8615 (TTY) or www.nci.nih.gov
- American Dietetic Association Consumer Nutrition Hot Line 800/366-1655 or www.eatright.org

INFORM YOURSELF:

To find this and previous *JAMA* Patient Pages, check out the AMA's Web site at www.ama-assn.org/consumer.htm.

Additional Sources: American Dietetic Association's Complete Food and Nutrition Guide, National Cancer Institute, Food and Drug Administration

Mi Young Hwang, Writer

Richard M. Glass, MD, Editor

Jeff Molter, Director of Science News

The JAMA Patient Page is a public service of JAMA and the AMA. The information and recommendations appearing on this page are appropriate in most instances; but they are not a substitute for medical diagnosis. For specific information concerning your personal medical condition, JAMA and the AMA suggest that you consult your physician. This page may be reproduced noncommercially by physicians and other health care professionals to share with patients. Any other reproduction is subject to AMA approval. To purchase bulk reprints, call 212/354-0050.

