How to Fit More Fruits and Veggies into Your Diet

Hold on to your egg nog, here’s a statistic that might surprise you: Only 10 percent of adults eat enough fruits and veggies!

That’s according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), which published a new study last month on fruit and vegetable eating patterns in the United States. The CDC also found that young adults, men, and people living in poverty eat even less than the average adult.

We all know the importance of including fruits and vegetables in our diet, right? Mom’s been nagging us about it since we started on solid food. And now that we’re grown, our doctors have taken up the refrain.

But hey, they only want what’s best for us! They know that fruits and vegetables can help reduce the risk of many leading causes of illness and death, including heart disease, type 2 diabetes, some cancers, and obesity.

The Pros of Produce

Fruits and vegetables should be on the menu for so many reasons:

- They contain vitamins and minerals, like folate, magnesium, potassium, and vitamins A, C, and K, which are key to good health and high energy.
- They provide fiber that helps to keep the digestive system healthy.
- They can help us control our weight because they fill us up with fewer calories.
- They’re rich in antioxidants and phytochemicals, both of which can not only reduce the risk of cancer and heart disease but can slow the impacts of aging.

Current dietary guidelines from the U.S. Department of Agriculture recommend 5 to 9 servings of fruit and vegetables a day. A serving is the equivalent of about 1 cup in most cases. A serving of leafy greens is 2 cups. Fresh, frozen, canned and dried all count toward the total.

A British study published earlier this year found that even smaller amounts have some protective benefits. For example, about 2.5 servings a day was associated with a 4 percent reduction in the risk of cancer and a 15 percent reduction in the risk of premature death.

But 10 a day is even better, said the lead author of the research from the School of Public Health at Imperial College London. At this level of consumption, researchers found a:
• 24 percent reduced risk of heart disease.
• 33 percent reduced risk of stroke.
• 13 percent reduced risk of cancer.
• 31 percent reduction in premature death.

**What’s Stopping Us?**

So if fruits and vegetables are so good for us, why aren’t we eating more of them?

Earlier studies have found that high cost, limited availability and access, and a perceived lack of cooking and preparation time can be barriers to fruit and vegetable consumption.

In 2016, Lewis and Clark County published a community health improvement plan that targeted these barriers. A broad cross-section of community members committed to increasing participation in community gardens, increasing the availability and affordability of healthy foods, and offering community classes on how to prepare meals with fresh produce.

As individuals, we can also find creative ways to squeeze more fruits and vegetables into our daily diet. I signed up to get a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) box of seasonal produce grown by local farmers and delivered regularly. It’s like waiting for Christmas to see what’s in the box each week, and recipes are usually included. Who knew that parsnips could be so tasty!

**Covert Carrots and Other Tips**

Here are some other suggestions for fitting more produce into your diet:

• Keep pre-cut, pre-washed fresh fruit and vegetables (like cubed melon or baby carrots) on hand for snacking.
• Keep fresh fruit in a bowl on your dining table or kitchen counter, where it’s easy to see and grab.
• Satisfy your cravings for something crunchy by snacking on vegetable chips made with zucchini, beets, or sweet potatoes.
• Get a salad instead of fries as your side dish when eating out.
• Save veggie odds and ends to make vegetable stock.
• Patronize the Farmer’s Market in season, or plant a garden of your own.
• Experiment with new and seasonal vegetables. Vow to try one new one each week or month.
• Dunk cut-up veggies into dips like hummus or guacamole. Slather nut butter on apple or banana slices.
• Prepare soups and stews that are rich in vegetables.
• Stuff an omelet, sandwich, or taco with vegetables.
• Add fruit to your morning cereal or yogurt.
• Add grated, shredded, or chopped veggies to lasagna, meat loaf, pasta sauce, and rice dishes.
• Eat fruit for dessert.
• Use lettuce to make a sandwich wrap.
• Sneak applesauce or shaved carrots or zucchini into muffin recipes.
• Add spinach or cooked zucchini to your pesto.
• Mix mashed cauliflower into your mashed potatoes.
• Carmelize veggies by cooking slowly on low temperatures. They’ll be extra-tender and rich.

For more information, including recipes, visit www.fruitsandveggiesmorematters.org/