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Vegetables and Fruits: A Rare Case of Unanimous Agreement Among Experts

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Because so many aspects of diet and nutrition are controversial, there is a certain comfort in finding areas of overwhelming agreement. Whatever views one might hold on whether to drink milk or eat meat, how many glasses of water or other liquids to drink each day, whether to take vitamin and mineral supplements (and which ones), the relative merits of organic versus conventionally grown foods, or whether the health benefits of eating fish outweigh the risks, there is virtual unanimity when it comes to the value of vegetables and fruits. For those with a strong penchant for peace and consensus, these plant foods provide a shelter from the storm.

No substitutes can ever replace these treasures of nature. No pill, potion, or powder can more than vaguely mimic their unique biochemistry, not to mention their magnificent array of natural tastes and colors. And while some of these plant foods possess unusually strong quantities of specific nutrients (such as the vitamin A and C in kale, or the antioxidants in blueberries and cranberries), all are beneficial. Eating a variety of them is the best way to guarantee that you will benefit from their nutritional goodness.

The research on vegetables and fruits is both deep and wide, leading all major establishment and complementary and alternative health care organizations to emphasize their importance at the core of a healthy diet. The Surgeon General, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Cancer Institute, all major health advocacy organizations including the American Diabetes Association, American Osteoporosis Association, American Heart Association, and American Cancer Society, as well as the American Dietetic Association, American Medical Association, and American Chiropractic Association are unanimous in urging everyone to have lots of vegetables and fruits.

High-fat, high protein diets like Atkins and the Zone may have little else in common with low-fat, plant-centered vegetarian (Dean Ornish) or vegan (Neal Barnard, Caldwell Esselstyn) approaches, but on one thing they all agree—if you don't eat enough vegetables and fruits, your health will suffer.

When discussing this with patients in my practice, or students in my clinical nutrition class, I emphasize two points above all:

1. Everyone needs several servings of vegetables and fruits per day. The federal government recommends at least three servings of vegetables and two of fruit, but it's fine to have more than that. A 'serving' is approximately the size of the palm of your hand, so a hearty portion on your plate or in your bowl in some cases counts as more than one serving. A plentiful helping of summer salad with lettuce, other greens, and generous amounts celery, carrots, peppers, cabbage or tomatoes might provide three or even four servings of vegetables.

2. It is very important to find healthy versions of these foods *that you enjoy*. Though broccoli may be chock full of calcium, magnesium, vitamins A and C, and wonderful antioxidants with long names, if the broccoli on your plate has been boiled to death and lacks any seasoning, most people will find eating it a dreaded chore. But if you can find a version (in a cookbook, at a restaurant, or at mom's house) that you really like (maybe steamed, with a special lemon sauce), or else eat it uncooked in a salad, then having a nutritious meal can actually become a pleasure. That's always the goal.

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Food is far more than biochemical nutrients measured in numbers. It is taste and texture and emotion. For most of us, it is suffused with memories of countless family dinners, interwoven with all the comfort and discomfort of our growing years. As Maya Tiwari has written, “Food is memory. Memory is being. Eating is remembering.”¹ While there is much to be learned from studying the specific nutrients in foods, please do not let anyone convince you that food and nutrition are primarily a matter of mathematical or chemical formulas.

Artfully arguing against this type of ‘nutritionism,’ Michael Pollan, author of *The Botany of Desire* and *The Omnivore’s Dilemma*, advises (with tongue only slightly in cheek) that no one should ever eat anything that his or her great-great-grandmother would not have recognized as a food. I would amend that slightly, to refer to foods that *someone’s* great-great-grandmother would have recognized. My own would not have been acquainted with tofu, but the great-great-grandmothers of my Asian colleagues and students certainly would have known it well.

So, as our mothers and grandmothers admonished us, “Eat your vegetables!” Eat your fruits as well. Enjoy!

Reference

1. Tiwari M. *Ayurveda: A Life of Balance*. (p. 15). Rochester, VT: Healing Arts Press; 1995.

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