

## Vegetables

They were probably the last things left on your dinner plate when you were a child. But as an adult, you probably know that vegetables don't have to be boring or a challenge to eat. You can enjoy them raw or cooked, on their own or as embellishments for other dishes. You can add vegetables to soups, salads, breads or entrees. You can even juice or blend them for a nutritious drink. Vegetables offer a wonderful array of flavors, textures and colors. They also promote good health by providing vitamins and minerals and other important nutrients.

### Benefits of Vegetables

A nutritional powerhouse, vegetables have vitamins and minerals and are good sources of dietary fiber and phytochemicals — a group of compounds that may help prevent chronic diseases such as cardiovascular disease, cancer and diabetes.

Many vegetables, such as **broccoli, green peppers and spinach**, are also good sources of antioxidants — substances that slow down oxidation, a natural process that leads to cell and tissue damage. Vegetables contain no cholesterol and are naturally low in fat, sodium and calories.

Different vegetables provide different nutrients, so enjoy a wide variety. All colors, even white, have important health benefits. But some vegetables provide more health benefits than do others. For instance, if you typically use only one type of lettuce — such as iceberg lettuce — you're missing out on some nutrients, not to mention taste. Also **try bibb, romaine or dark leaf lettuce**, all of which have more vitamins A and C than the iceberg variety. Eating a variety of colorful vegetables not only ensures that you get more nutrients but also helps make your meals and snacks more interesting.

For more variety, experiment with unfamiliar vegetables. For example, **jicama** (HEE-kuh-muh) is high in vitamin C and fiber. It's a Mexican potato that looks like a turnip and tastes like a water chestnut, only sweeter. **Chicory**, a leafy vegetable often used in salads, is high in folate, vitamins A and C, potassium and fiber. It's also a good source of calcium, magnesium, riboflavin, and vitamin B-6. Other nutrient-packed vegetables stock the produce section of your grocery store, so don't limit yourself to familiar favorites.

## Selecting vegetables

**Look for brightly colored vegetables.** The best items have blemish-free surfaces and regular, characteristic shapes and sizes.

**Sort through and discard any damaged items.** Bruises and nicks can attract molds, which can lead to spoilage of an entire bag of vegetables. Leaves or greens should be crisp and free of wilting.

**Buy only the fresh vegetables you plan to eat within a few days.** Long storage time reduces nutrient levels and taste.

**Choose in-season vegetables.** Typically, the closer you are to the growing source, the fresher your produce and the better it tastes.

**Enjoy packaged vegetables when out of season.** Frozen vegetables are low in sodium and sometimes offer more nutrients than do less-than-peak-condition fresh vegetables, as they are processed quickly after picking. If you choose canned vegetables, look for those without added salt.

## Storing vegetables

**Store fresh vegetables properly.** Place root vegetables, such as potatoes and yams, in a cool, dark place. Store other vegetables in the refrigerator crisper drawer, if available.

**Don't wash vegetables before storing.** Make sure all produce is dry before storing.

**Throw away produce you have kept too long.** Discard vegetables that are moldy or slimy, smell bad, or are past the "best if used by" date.

## Serving vegetables

**Wash vegetables thoroughly to remove dirt and pesticide residue before cooking.** If appropriate, use a small scrub brush on vegetables in which you eat the outer skin.

**Leave edible peels on vegetables whenever possible.** The peels of many vegetables — especially potatoes — contain considerable amounts of nutrients and fiber.

**Enjoy many vegetables raw.** Keep bell peppers, broccoli, carrots, cauliflower, celery or other raw vegetables ready to eat in your refrigerator.

**Cook vegetables as quickly as possible.** Stir-frying, steaming, and microwaving are quick-cooking methods. Long exposure to higher temperatures leads to loss of some nutrients. Consider reserving any cooking water — which can contain some nutrients — for adding to soups, stews or sauces.

## **Easy ways to add vegetables to your diet**

Include grated raw vegetables to batters and doughs for quick breads, muffins and cookies.

Choose a wide variety of salad greens, including arugula, chicory, collard, dandelion greens, kale, mustard greens, spinach and watercress.

Look for pasta made with vegetables such as spinach or beets.

Order vegetable pizza instead of a meat-based pizza.

Stir-fry vegetables with tofu or just a small portion of poultry, seafood or meat.

Use vegetables as a base for, or as added ingredients in, soups.

Enrich and thicken soups and sauces with cooked and pureed vegetables in place of cream or whole milk.

Double or triple your vegetable serving size at supper.

Try eating your vegetables without any margarine or butter. Or use butter sprinkles — Molly McButter or Butter Buds, for example — or spray margarine.

Add grated raw carrot to lean ground beef or turkey when making meatloaf or meatballs.

Add chopped vegetables to your spaghetti sauce.

Enjoy vegetables as snacks by keeping them ready to eat in the refrigerator at all times.