

Sneaking Veggies Into Your Daily Diet

Painless ways to increase veggies in your life

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Essential Nutrients

The average American is lucky to get two servings of vegetables a day. Nutrition experts would have us eating five to seven helpings a day. This pretty much captures America's health problems in a nutshell. If we ate more vegetables and fewer processed foods, we'd lose weight, clean our arteries, balance our blood sugar, and shut down a large number of hospitals. But getting from two servings a day to seven doesn't come without planning or effort.

1. Serve raw vegetables at every meal. Nearly everyone likes carrot sticks, celery sticks, cucumber slices, string beans, cherry tomatoes, and/or green pepper strips. They're healthy, they have virtually no calories, they have a satisfying crunch, and they can substantially cut your consumption of the more calorie-dense main course. So make it a practice: A plate of raw vegetables in the center of the table, no matter what the meal is.

2. Take advantage of prepared veggies. We usually don't espouse prepared foods. They're usually more expensive and high in artificial flavorings, sugars, and sodium. But when it comes to prepared veggies -- bagged salads, prewashed spinach, peeled and diced butternut squash, washed and chopped kale -- we're all for it. Numerous consumer studies find that we're more likely to use bagged salads and other produce. In fact, the introduction of bagged, prewashed spinach in the late 1990s is touted as the main reason spinach consumption increased 16.3 percent in the United States between 1999 and 2001.

3. Sneak vegetables into breakfast and lunch. One reason we don't get enough vegetables is that many of us consider them merely a side dish to dinner. If you really want to increase your vegetable consumption, you have no choice but to eat them at other meals. How?

- Make salad a part of your everyday lunch.
- Make egg scrambles a regular breakfast, using a scrambled egg to hold together sautéed vegetables such as peppers, mushrooms, zucchini, asparagus, or onions.
- Eat leftover veggies from last night's dinner with breakfast or lunch.
- Cherry tomatoes, cucumbers, carrots, and celery, *all the time*.
- Make vegetable sandwiches, using almost any vegetable that won't roll out of the bread.

4. Start each dinner with a mixed green salad before you serve the main course. Not only will it help you eat more veggies, but by filling your stomach first with a nutrient-rich, low-calorie salad, there'll be just a bit less room for the higher-calorie items that follow.

5. Once a week, have an entrée salad. A salade niçoise is a good example: mixed greens, steamed green beans, boiled potatoes, sliced hard-boiled egg, and tuna drizzled with vinaigrette. Serve with crusty whole grain bread. Bon appétit!

6. Fill your spaghetti sauce with vegetables. We typically take a jar of low-sodium prepared sauce and add in string beans, peas, corn, bell peppers, mushrooms, tomatoes and more. Like it chunky? Cut them in big pieces. Don't want to know they're there? Shred

or puree them with a bit of sauce in the blender, then add.

7. Order your weekly pizza with extra veggies. Instead of the same old pepperoni and onions, do your health and digestion a favor and ask for artichoke hearts, broccoli, hot peppers, and other exotic vegetables many pizza joints stock these days for their gourmet pies.

Minimize Meat

8. Puree into soup. Potatoes, carrots, winter squash, cauliflower, and broccoli -- just about any cooked (or leftover) vegetable can be made into a creamy, comforting soup. Here's a simple recipe: In a medium saucepan, sauté 1 cup finely chopped onion in 1 tablespoon vegetable oil until tender. Combine the onion in a blender or food processor with cooked vegetables and puree until smooth. Return puree to saucepan and thin with broth or low-fat milk. Simmer and season to taste.

9. Add a bit of sweetness to your veggies. A study conducted at the State University of New York found that students like broccoli and cauliflower more when the vegetables had a 5 percent sugar solution added to them (basically, just a bit of sugar dissolved in water).

10. Follow the golden rule: Half of your dinner plate should be vegetables. That leaves a quarter of the plate for a healthy starch and a quarter for lean meat or fish. This is the perfectly balanced dinner, says Joan Salge Blake, R.D., clinical assistant professor of nutrition at Boston University's Sargent College.

11. Build a sandwich that has more lettuce and tomato than meat. Stack the meat filler in the sandwich to no higher than the thickness of a standard slice of bread. Then pile on low-calorie slices of lettuce and tomatoes to the combined height of both slices of bread. Presto: Your sandwich tower has the height of the Empire State Building yet the svelteness of the Eiffel Tower, says Blake.

12. Have a veggie burger for lunch once a week topped with a sliced tomato and lettuce. Honestly, they taste better than you imagine.

13. Open a can of low-sodium soup and add a bag of precut broccoli and carrots, either fresh or frozen. Voilà! You have a superfast and easy lunch or dinner entrée, ready to be flavored with your preferred spices, herbs, or hot sauce. As the soup simmers, it will simultaneously cook the veggies, boosting the nutritional value and fiber, say the nutrition twins, Tammy Lakatos Shames, R.D., and Lyssie Lakatos, R.D. The two are the authors of *Fire Up Your Metabolism: 9 Proven Principles for Burning Fat and Losing Weight Forever*.

14. Move your veggies to the top shelf of the refrigerator. As long as they are bagged properly, they'll last as well as if in a vegetable crisper. More important, now they'll be visible and enticing, say the nutrition twins. In particular, keep fast-to-eat vegetables like baby carrots, precut red and green pepper strips, broccoli florets, tomatoes, and cucumbers as accessible as possible.

15. Eat vegetables like fruit. Half a cucumber, a whole tomato, a stalk of celery, or a long, fresh carrot are as pleasant to munch on as an apple. It may not seem typical, but who cares? A whole vegetable makes a terrific snack.

16. Have a V8. Although higher in sodium, vegetable juices do provide the nutrition of a vegetable serving. Throw a six-ounce can of vegetable juice or tomato juice into your tote in the morning; many come in low-sodium forms, says Mary Gregg, R.D., director of Human Care Services for NutriSystem, Inc.

Go Green

17. Always start with mirepoix. This blend of onions, celery, carrots, parsley, and bay leaves, pronounced "meer-pwah," is a great way to sneak veggies into nearly every entrée you prepare. Sauté a cup (or more) of the mixture (which you can buy already cut up and prepared in some groceries) in two tablespoons of olive oil, then use as a starter for sauces, stews, and soups.

18. Serve chili, soup, stew, pastas, or rice in a scooped-out tomato or green pepper. Then make sure you finish the "bowl."

19. Add chopped kale or other hearty greens to your next soup or stew. Just a couple of minutes is all that's needed to steam the greens down to tenderness and add quantities of potassium, fiber, and calcium to your soup, says Lisa C. Andrews, R.D., a clinical dietitian for the VA Medical Center in Cincinnati.

20. Use low-sodium vegetable juice as the base for soups instead of chicken or beef broth.

21. Go vegetarian one day a week. You can do this by merely substituting the meat serving with a vegetable serving (suggestion: make it a crunchy, strong-flavored vegetable like broccoli). Or you can dabble in the world of vegetarian cooking, in which recipes are developed specifically to make a filling, robust meal out of vegetables and whole grains. For those times, you should get yourself a good vegetarian cookbook. The Moosewood Restaurant cookbook series is popular, and for good reason. Other good options include: *Cooking Vegetarian: Healthy, Delicious, and Easy Vegetarian Cuisine* by Vesanto Melina and Joseph Forest, and *Becoming Vegetarian: The Complete Guide to Adopting a Healthy Vegetarian Diet* by Vesanto Melina et al.

22. Use salsa liberally. First, make sure you have a large batch filled with vegetables. One good approach: Add chopped yellow squash and zucchini to store-bought salsa. Then put salsa on everything: baked potatoes, rice, chicken breasts, sandwiches, eggs, steak, even bread. Salsa shouldn't be just for chips. It's too tasty and healthy not to be used all the time.

23. Throw shredded carrots and cabbage into your next soup, salad, or casserole. These coleslaw ingredients add flavor, color, and lots of vitamins and minerals, says Andrews.

24. Roast your vegetables. Here is one of the great side dishes, easy to make, delicious to eat, and amazingly healthy. Plus, it tastes surprisingly sweet, and lasts well as a leftover, meaning you can make large batches and serve throughout the week. Cut hearty root vegetables like parsnips, turnips, rutabagas, carrots, and onions into inch-thick chunks and arrange in a single layer on a cookie sheet. Drizzle with olive oil and sprinkle with kosher or sea salt, freshly ground pepper, and fresh or dried herbs. Roast in a 450°F oven until soft, about 45 minutes, turning once. That's it!

Experiment

25. Use vegetables as sauces. How about pureed roasted red peppers seasoned with herbs and a bit of lemon juice, then drizzled over fish? Or puree butternut or acorn squash with carrots, grated ginger, and bit of brown sugar for a yummy topping for chicken or turkey. Cooked vegetables are easily converted into sauces. It just takes a little ingenuity and a blender.

26. Nix the bitterness of healthy veggies with a sprinkle of salt. Of course, we're going to be talking about how to reduce the sodium in your diet later, but the chemical

reality is that salt helps neutralize bitterness. For an added kick, try capers, olives, or mashed anchovies instead of salt.

27. Grill your vegetables. If you only use your grill for meats, you've been missing out! Peppers, zucchini, asparagus, onions, eggplant -- even tomatoes -- all taste amazingly good when grilled. Generally, all you need to do is coat them with olive oil and throw them on. Turn every few minutes and remove when they start to soften. Or skewer chunks of veggies on a bamboo or metal skewer and turn frequently. You can also buy grilling baskets that keep the veggies from falling through the slats in the grill.

28. Go exotic. Every week, try one exotic vegetable, the kind that will stump the grocery store cashier. Here are some to try, and ways to try them:

- **Belgian endive.** This type of lettuce has a mild, slightly bitter flavor, and is packed with fiber, iron, and potassium. Use it in salads and instead of crackers with vegetable dips.
- **Jicama (HEE-kah-mah).** Known as the Mexican potato, jicama is a root tuber (like potatoes). Buy it smooth and firm with unblemished roots. Serve it peeled, cold, and raw in thin slices or strips, either straight up with a dip or in salads or coleslaw. Or throw it into soups, stews, or stir-fries. It works great as a substitute for water chestnuts.
- **Bok choy.** An Oriental cabbage, bok choy is excellent chopped and stir-fried in a bit of peanut oil and soy sauce. Or throw it into soup just before serving.
- **Chayote (chi-OH-tay) squash.** A summer squash native to Latin America, chayote squash is also known as vegetable pear because of its shape and color. It has a mild taste, like zucchini, with a slightly citrus tang. You don't have to peel it, and the seeds inside are edible. Just cut into cubes, add 1 cup water, cover, and microwave for about 8 minutes.
- **Kohlrabi.** A member of the turnip family, it is often called a cabbage turnip. It's sweeter, juicier, crisper, and more delicate in flavor than a turnip. The cooked leaves have a kale/collard flavor. Trim and pare the bulb to remove all traces of the fibrous underlayer just beneath the skin, then eat raw, boil, steam, microwave, or sauté, or add to potato casseroles.
- **Fennel.** Also known as sweet anise, fennel has a sweet, mild licorice flavor. The feathery fronds can be used as an herb, like dill weed, to flavor soups and stews. The broad, bulbous base is treated like a vegetable and can be eaten raw, or sliced and diced for stews, soups, and stuffing.
- **Spaghetti squash.** Also called vegetable spaghetti, this oval-shaped yellow squash is a relative newcomer and a novel one: When cooked, the flesh of the squash can be pulled apart to form slender strands that resemble spaghetti.

29. Use canned pumpkin for dessert. Just sprinkle it with cinnamon, and mix in two packets of Splenda. Even if you eat the whole can, this dessert is only 140 calories and packs a healthy 9 grams of fiber. For 1/2 cup you get 40 calories and 3.5 grams of fiber, not to mention tons of beta-carotene.

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