

BYU WELLNESS PROGRAM

HELPING YOU TO BUILD A HEALTHY FUTURE

The Benefits of Eating Fruits and Vegetables

Diana McGuire, MS, RD, CD, CNSD
Nutrition, Dietetics and Food Science



The "5-A-Day" campaign is a national initiative established in 1991 to promote consumption of fruits and vegetables. Despite the program's longevity, in the year 2000, only 20.6% of Utahns consumed 5 or more servings per day, far below our national goal of 75%.

Based on increasing evidence of the benefits of phytochemicals (non-nutritive components of plants) found in fruits and vegetables, the Produce for Better Health Foundation recently incorporated the "5-A-Day: the Color Way" campaign into the already existing "5-A-Day" campaign. This new campaign emphasizes eating a rainbow of fruits and vegetables to capitalize on the various health-promoting phytochemicals found in a variety of colors of produce.

Phytochemicals differ from vitamins and minerals in that they are not considered "essential" nutrients, i.e., those which are critical for normal metabolism and growth. However, they must be consumed consistently over time because they are not stored in the body. The most well known phytochemicals are the antioxidants, although there are many others. They tend to vary by the fruit or vegetable's color, hence the concept of eating a rainbow.

Most researchers now feel that food synergy (the interaction of two or more nutrients and other healthful substances within foods working together to achieve an effect) is difficult to achieve with single nutrients rather than overall dietary patterns. Nutritionists are convinced of a "foods first" approach to eating. Foods are very complex in nature, and we know that there are many components in foods yet to be identified. And of course, besides phytochemicals, fruits and vegetables contain various fibers and many vitamins and minerals.

Although the majority of data regarding fruit and vegetable benefits has been obtained from case-control studies, there have been an increasing number of prospective trials that show an association

with increased fruit and vegetable intake and improved health, reduced risk of major diseases, and possibly delayed onset of age-related indicators. Various studies have documented the following health associations with increased fruit and vegetable intake:

Convincing evidence for:

- Reduced cancer risk (epithelial cancer, digestive and respiratory tracts, and hormone-related cancers)
- Reduced cardiovascular disease risk (coronary artery disease, hypertension, and stroke)
- Reduced obesity, reduced birth defects, and reduced incidence of diverticulosis

Plausible evidence for:

- Improved chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and lung function
- Reduced risk of diabetes
- Increased longevity
- Improved aging and cognition
- Reduced risk of osteoporosis
- Reduced neurodegenerative disease
- Reduced skin aging and wrinkling
- Improved rheumatoid arthritis
- Reduced incidence of cataracts.

The take home message for all Americans is to take advantage of the many wonderful, colorful, and flavorful varieties of fruits and vegetables. Include them as often as possible in meals and snacks. Try new ones and experiment with creative ways to prepare them. Look for the rainbow of colors in the supermarket, such as deep oranges and bright yellows, deep greens, deep reds and bright pinks, blues and purples, and whites. Be thankful that the Lord created such wonderful foods "both to please the eye and to gladden the heart", "for taste and for smell, to strengthen the body and to enliven the soul." (D&C 59:18,19)

For more information and recipes, go to:
www.5aday.com

