Vary Your Veggies

The *Dietary Guidelines for Americans 2005* recommends eating 2½ cups of vegetables every day, based on a 2,000-calorie diet. You may need to eat more or less, depending on your calorie level. This may seem like a tremendous amount to eat; however, vegetables are very nutritious. They are rich in fiber and nutrients while being low in fats, sugars, and total calories. In addition, vegetables are cholesterol-free.

Eating a diet rich in vegetables and fruits as part of an overall healthy diet may reduce your risk for:
- stroke and other cardiovascular diseases.
- coronary heart disease.
- type 2 diabetes.
- certain cancers, such as mouth, stomach, and colon-rectum.
- kidney stones.
- bone loss.

**Nutrients in Vegetables**

**Vegetables Contain Several Nutrients:**

**Vitamin A**—keeps eyes and skin healthy and helps to protect against infections.

**Vitamin C**—helps heal cuts and wounds, keeps teeth and gums healthy, and aids in iron absorption.

**Vitamin E**—helps protect vitamin A and essential fatty acids from cell oxidation.

**Potassium**—may help to maintain healthy blood pressure.

**Folate (folic acid)**—helps to form red blood cells, and is important during pregnancy to reduce a woman’s risk of having a baby with a spinal cord or brain defect.

**Dietary fiber**—helps reduce blood cholesterol levels, may lower risk of heart disease, helps reduce constipation and diverticulosis, and helps provide a feeling of fullness with fewer calories.

**Phytochemicals**—help protect against diseases, serve as antioxidants, detoxifiers, immune boosters and anti-inflammatory agents. Inflammation plays a major role in heart attacks, some cancers, allergies, Alzheimer’s, and autoimmune diseases.

**Vegetable Sources of Each Nutrient:**

**Vitamin A**—bright orange vegetables like carrots, sweet potatoes, and pumpkin; tomatoes and tomato products; red sweet pepper; leafy greens such as spinach, collards, turnip greens, kale, beet and mustard greens, green leaf lettuce, and romaine.

**Vitamin C**—broccoli; peppers; tomatoes; cabbage (especially Chinese cabbage); Brussels sprouts; potatoes; leafy greens such as romaine, turnip greens, and spinach.

**Vitamin E**—turnip greens; spinach; tomato (sauce, puree); carrot juice; dandelion greens.

**Potassium**—baked white or sweet potatoes; cooked greens (such as spinach); winter (orange) squash; cooked dry beans; soybeans (green and mature); tomato products (sauce, paste, puree); beet greens.

**Folate**—cooked dry beans and peas; deep green leaves, like spinach and mustard greens.

**Dietary Fiber**—all vegetables.

**Phytochemicals**—two common ones are lycopene in tomatoes and sulforaphane in broccoli.
Vegetables are represented by the green band on MyPyramid, USDA’s latest food guide, which shows that foods from all groups are needed daily for good health. This group includes vegetables of all types—raw, cooked, fresh, frozen, canned and dried/dehydrated. They can be consumed whole, cut-up, mashed, or as 100% vegetable juice.

**Variety is Important**

To keep meals and snacks interesting, vary your veggie choices. Favor the dark or vividly colored vegetables, especially the deep green and orange ones, but continue to eat and enjoy the lighter colored vegetables to add variety to your diet.

Deeply colored vegetables and fruits contain the most vitamins, minerals, and antioxidants. This includes all dark green, deep red, purple, and bright orange or yellow plant foods. Eat more dark-green veggies like broccoli, spinach, and other dark leafy greens. Include more orange vegetables, like carrots and sweet potatoes in your diet, as well as legumes (dry beans and peas).

**Choose a Variety of Vegetables Every Day From the Five Subgroups:**

- **Dark Green:** bok choy, broccoli, collard greens, dark green leafy lettuce, kale, mesclun (a mixture of young tender greens such as lettuces, arugula, and chicory), mustard greens, romaine lettuce, spinach, turnip greens, and watercress.

- **Orange Vegetables:** acorn squash, butternut squash, carrots, hubbard squash, pumpkin, and sweet potatoes.

- **Dry Beans and Peas:** black beans, black-eyed peas, garbanzo beans (chickpeas), kidney beans, lentils, lima beans (mature), navy beans, pinto beans, soy beans, split peas, tofu (bean curd made from soybeans), and white beans.

- **Starchy Vegetables:** corn, green peas, lima beans (green), and potatoes.

- **Other:** artichokes, asparagus, bean sprouts, beets, Brussels sprouts, cabbage, cauliflower, celery, cucumbers, eggplant, green beans, green or red peppers, iceberg (head) lettuce, mushrooms, okra, onions, parsnips, tomatoes, tomato juice, vegetable juice, turnips, wax beans, and zucchini.

**What Counts as a Cup?**

1 cup = 1 cup raw or cooked vegetables = 1 cup of vegetable juice = 2 cups raw leafy greens

For example, 1 cup of cooked spinach counts as 1 cup of vegetables, while 2 cups of raw spinach is equivalent to 1 cup of vegetables.

**Other Amounts that Count as 1 Cup:**

- **Broccoli:** 3 spears 5" long raw or cooked
- **Carrots:** 2 medium or about 12 baby carrots
- **Sweet potato:** 1 large baked (2¼"+ diameter)
- **Tofu:** 1 cup ½" cubes (about 8 oz.)
- **Corn:** 1 large ear (8" to 9" long)
- **White potatoes:** 1 medium boiled or baked (2½"-3" diameter); French fried*: 20 strips (2½" to 4" long) (*Contains discretionary calories.)
- **Celery:** 2 large stalks (11" to 12" long)
- **Green or red peppers:** 1 large pepper (3" diameter, 3¼" long)
- **Tomatoes:** 1 large raw whole (3"

For additional 1-cup equivalents, visit www.mypyramid.gov/pyramid/vegetables_counts.html

**How Much is Needed?**

Most people should eat about 2½ cups of vegetables per day. The exact amount you need depends on your age, sex, and level of physical activity. The following amounts are appropriate for people who get less than 30 minutes per day of moderate physical activity, beyond normal daily activities. If you are more physically active, you may be able to eat more while staying within your calorie needs.

**Daily Vegetable Needs**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Individual</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Amount</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Children</td>
<td>2-3 years old</td>
<td>1 cup</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4-8 years old</td>
<td>1½ cups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girls</td>
<td>9-13 years old</td>
<td>2 cups</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>14-18 years old</td>
<td>2½ cups</td>
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<tr>
<td>Boys</td>
<td>9-13 years old</td>
<td>2½ cups</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>14-18 years old</td>
<td>3 cups</td>
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<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>19-50 years old</td>
<td>2½ cups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>51+ years old</td>
<td>2 cups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>19-50 years old</td>
<td>3 cups</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>51+ years old</td>
<td>2½ cups</td>
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</table>
Vegetable subgroups are organized according to their nutrient content. It is not necessary to eat vegetables from every subgroup daily. However, the following chart lists specific amounts from each subgroup that should be consumed over a week in order to reach your daily intake recommendation. Try to eat the amounts shown on a weekly basis.

### Weekly Vegetable Needs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Dark Greens</th>
<th>Orange</th>
<th>Dry Beans &amp; Peas</th>
<th>Starchy</th>
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<tr>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>9-13 years old</td>
<td>2 cups</td>
<td>1½ cups</td>
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<td>2½ cups</td>
<td>5½ cups</td>
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<tr>
<td>14-18 years old</td>
<td>3 cups</td>
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<td>3 cups</td>
<td>6½ cups</td>
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<tr>
<td>14-18 years old</td>
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### Easy Ways to Get Your Veggies

- Make vegetables and fruits the focus of every meal. For example, create a plate around broccoli and cauliflower rather than using them as a side dish to meat.
- For quick and easy cooking in the microwave, stock up on frozen vegetables.
- Buy vegetables that are easy to prepare. A quick salad can be made with a pre-washed bag of salad greens, baby carrots and grape tomatoes.
- Keep cut-up veggies visible in a see-through container in the refrigerator. Include broccoli florettes, cauliflower, cucumber slices, red or green pepper strips, as well as carrot and celery sticks.
- For a quick snack, try carrot sticks dipped in hummus and celery sticks spread with peanut butter.
- Try crunchy vegetables, raw or lightly steamed.
- Grill vegetable kabobs as part of a barbecue meal. Try tomatoes, mushrooms, green peppers, and onions.
- Plan some meals around a vegetable main dish, such as a vegetable stir-fry or soup. Then add other foods to complement it.
- Shred carrots or zucchini into meatloaf, casseroles, quick breads, and muffins.
- Add fresh chopped spinach, zucchini, or eggplant to some canned tomatoes to enrich your favorite pasta dish.
- Include chopped vegetables in dishes like scrambled eggs and lasagna.
- Enjoy a main dish salad for lunch. Try something different, like baby spinach, garbanzo beans, cauliflower, or red cabbage. And, go light on the salad dressing!
- Include a green salad with your dinner every night. Add color with baby carrots, shredded red cabbage, or spinach leaves. Include in-season vegetables for variety.
- Add tomatoes, greens, cucumbers, onion, and/or lettuce to your sandwich.
- Order a veggie pizza with toppings like mushrooms, green peppers, and onions, and ask for extra veggies.
- Use pureed, cooked vegetables such as potatoes to thicken stews, soups, and gravies. These add flavor, nutrients, and texture.
- Try a low-fat salad dressing with raw broccoli, red and green peppers, celery sticks or cauliflower.
- Include cooked dry beans or peas in flavorful mixed dishes, such as chili or minestrone soup.
- For additional nutrients, substitute a sweet potato for your regular baked potato.

### Veggie Tips for Children

It can be difficult to get kids to eat a variety of vegetables. Never force them to eat veggies, but continue to offer a variety every day.
• You are the role model for your children. Set a good example by eating vegetables at mealtime and as snacks.
• If possible, allow children to plant and harvest some vegetables. They like to watch plants grow and usually will eat foods they planted and cared for.
• Let children choose dinner vegetables or what goes into salads.
• Kids enjoy helping in the kitchen. Depending on their age, children can help shop for, clean, peel, or cut up vegetables. They are often more willing to eat foods they helped choose and prepare.
• At the grocery store let children pick a new vegetable to try.
• Provide cut-up vegetables for snacks.
• Most children prefer foods served separately. Rather than serving mixed vegetables, offer two vegetables separately.
• Decorate their plates with vegetable slices.
• Pack fresh vegetable slices in their school lunch boxes.

**Roasted Veggies**

Place non-starchy vegetables of choice on a baking sheet and lightly toss with a small amount of olive or canola oil. Season with pepper, garlic, a little salt and Italian seasoning. Bake at 425 °F for 15 to 20 minutes or longer. Serve with balsamic vinegar.

**Nutrition Tidbits**

If you want to lose weight, eat more vegetables and fruits. Focus on non-starchy vegetables like spinach, broccoli, carrots, tomatoes, and lettuce.

Limit the amounts of starchy vegetables to what is recommended each week.

• Choose a dark green or orange vegetable rather than a starchy vegetable more often.
• Eat a green salad instead of French fries.
• Select small sized potato portions: a small baked potato or a small order of French fries.

When buying canned vegetables, no salt-added is the best choice.

To retain as much nutritional value as possible, serve vegetables raw frequently. Steam, bake or microwave vegetables for the shortest time possible. Use as little water as possible when boiling to reduce exposure to water and heat.

Dietary fiber only comes from plant foods. Set a goal to get 14 grams of fiber for every 1,000 calories you consume.

Dry bean and peas (legumes) are the best sources of fiber and should be eaten at least twice a week. They are part of the vegetable and the meat groups.

Add fiber to your diet gradually over a period of several months. This allows time for the digestive tract to adjust, minimizing gas, bloating, diarrhea and cramps.

**Vegetable Shopping List**

Plan ahead. Buy a variety of nutrient-rich foods for meals and snacks throughout the week. Take this basic vegetable shopping list with you every time you go to the grocery store:

• broccoli
• carrots
• cucumbers
• frozen vegetables
• lettuce – dark green
• onions, garlic
• potatoes
• spinach
• sweet potatoes
• tomatoes
• seasonal items

**Sources:**

1. USDA. *Inside The Pyramid.*
3. Leslie, Alison. Dieting? *Think in Terms of Gains, Not Losses.* Nourishing News (March 2005), Clemson University Department of Food Science and Human Nutrition and EFNEP.
   [http://virtual.clemson.edu/groups/NIRC/pdf/NN0305.pdf](http://virtual.clemson.edu/groups/NIRC/pdf/NN0305.pdf)