

The health benefits of fruit and vegetables

Q Why encourage people to eat more fruit and vegetables?

A There is clear and growing evidence for the protective effects of fruit and vegetables against chronic diseases. Eating at least 5 portions of fruit and vegetables a day on average could lead to estimated reductions of up to 20% in overall deaths from chronic diseases such as coronary heart disease, stroke and some cancers. Experts regard increasing fruit and vegetable consumption as the second most important strategy for cancer prevention after reducing smoking.



**Just Eat More
(fruit & veg)**

Expert bodies, including the World Health Organization¹ and the UK Committee on Medical Aspects of Food and Nutrition Policy^{2, 3} consistently recommend eating at least 5 portions of a variety of fruit and vegetables a day (i.e. at least 400g a day). Increased consumption of fruit and vegetables may also:

- have a positive impact on other dietary goals, such as recommendations to increase fibre intake and reduce fat intake
- help to reduce the risk of weight gain and obesity
- help in the management of diabetes
- delay the development of cataracts
- improve bowel function
- help to reduce blood pressure.

Q Why are fruit and vegetables protective?

A The reason why fruit and vegetables have so many benefits is that they contain a wide variety of substances known to have health benefits including carotenoids, vitamin C, vitamin E and dietary fibre. They also contain many complex plant components – *phytochemicals* – such as flavonoids. Some of the vitamins and phytochemicals are also antioxidants, destroying harmful free radicals in the body.

The benefits of fruit and vegetables stem not only from the rich cocktail of individual components, but also the interactions between these components. This is why dietary supplements containing isolated vitamins or minerals do not appear to have the same beneficial effects as fruit and vegetables themselves. Indeed, in some studies, supplements caused more harm than good.

Q How do fruit and vegetables fit into a healthy diet?

A The Government recommends that consumers eat a varied, balanced diet low in fat, salt and added sugars. This means a diet which contains plenty of fruit, vegetables and starchy foods such as rice, pasta and potatoes, moderate amounts of milk and dairy foods and meat and alternatives, and only small amounts of foods which contain a lot of fat or added sugars or salt. This should provide all the nutrients that most people require.

Q Do people in the UK eat enough fruit and vegetables to benefit their health?

A No. Consumption of fruit and vegetables still falls well short of the 5 A DAY target. The National Diet and Nutrition Survey for adults⁴ found that average consumption was just 2.8 portions a day and only 13% of men and 15% of women consumed more than 5 portions a day. Consumption is particularly low in young adults and among men and women living in households in receipt of benefits. Intakes among children are also low, with average intake only around 2 portions per day.⁵

Q Has there been any change in fruit and vegetable intakes in recent years?

A The National Diet and Nutrition Survey showed that the men and women in the oldest group in the survey (those aged 50-64) are eating more fruit and vegetables than in the last survey of this type (1986/87). A smaller increase was seen in the 25-34 and 35-49 year old age groups, and there was no increase in intakes in the youngest age group (19-24 years).

Q How does UK consumption compare to Europe, and other countries?

A The UK is the 5th lowest consumer of fruit and vegetables in Europe. The average consumption of fruit and vegetables in England is around 3 portions a day, compared with 9 portions in Greece. In the US the average consumption is 4 portions.

Q Where can I get further information?

A Information on the **5 A DAY programme** is available from the Department of Health's website at www.dh.gov.uk/healthtopics

Information on **health issues** such as coronary heart disease, cancer, and obesity is available from the NHS Direct website at www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk

Information and advice on what constitutes a **healthy diet** is available from the Food Standards Agency's website at www.food.gov.uk

References

- 1 World Health Organization. 1990. *Diet, Nutrition, and the Prevention of Chronic Diseases*. Geneva: World Health Organization.
- 2 Department of Health. 1994. *Nutritional Aspects of Cardiovascular Disease*. London: HMSO.
- 3 Department of Health. 1998. *Nutritional Aspects of the Development of Cancer*. London: The Stationery Office.
- 4 Henderson L, Gregory J, Swan G. 2002. *National Diet and Nutrition Survey: adults aged 19 to 64 years. Types and quantities of foods consumed*. Norwich: TSO.
- 5 Gregory J, Lowe S, Bates CJ, Prentice A, Jackson LV, Smithers G, Wenlock R, Farron M. 2000. *National Diet and Nutrition Survey: Young People Aged 4-18 Years*. London: The Stationery Office.