

Vegetable Myths – Part One

As part of our continuing series on nutrition for seniors, we present some vegetable myths and facts.

When we were younger, our parents would always say “Eat your veggies! They’re good for you.” When your parents start getting older, it’s time to give them the same advice. Adding lots of vegetables to meals is a great idea because they are full of nutrients, are relatively low calorie and they add good taste and variety to a senior’s menu.

They provide nearly all of the vitamins and minerals required for good health and many of them – especially potatoes and squash – contain complex carbohydrates, which supply us with energy. Most also contain dietary fibre and a few, such as legumes, can also contribute to your protein intake.

At the same time, vegetables contain no cholesterol, have little or no fat, and are low in calories. When you consider how inexpensive most vegetables are compared to meat, you are really getting the most nutritional value for the number of calories you consume.

There are a number of myths and old wives’ tales surrounding vegetables. Following are some of the more famous ones which need busting. There are so many that we will feature more next week.

Fresh vegetables are always more nutritious than frozen

Studies show that sometimes you can get more nutrients from frozen vegetables, depending on the variety and how fresh the vegetables are at your supermarket. That’s because produce starts losing nutrient quality as soon as it is picked.

Frozen vegetables are flash frozen right after they are harvested, so they are preserved at their peak nutritional value and freshness. Your best bet in terms of taste, nutrition and texture is still fresh in-season produce. When that’s not an option, frozen spinach, for example, can be a better choice than fresh spinach which can take up to two weeks to reach the store after harvesting. What is true, however, is that fresh or frozen vegetables are preferable to canned vegetables.

Cooked vegetables are always less nutritious than raw

It depends on the vegetable. “Cooking does destroy some nutrients while it releases others,” says Marianne Nestle, author of *What to Eat*. It destroys Vitamin C and folic acid, which is why it’s not a good idea to cook oranges.”

On the other hand, when it comes to tomatoes, cooking releases vitamin A and it makes them easier to digest. It’s also easier for your body to absorb more lycopene, a cancer-fighting antioxidant found in cooked tomato sauce rather than raw tomatoes.

It is preferable to steam or roast veggies rather than boiling them, which leeches out water soluble vitamins into the cooking water. When buying frozen or canned vegetables, choose no sugar added and low sodium options.

Potatoes make you fat

Potatoes are virtually fat free and low in calories. These delicious and inexpensive root vegetables contain a healthy dose of potassium and fibre, which can actually make you feel satisfied longer and help you lose weight. It's not the potatoes themselves that make you fat, it's how you prepare and cook them and what you slather on your potato that can cause you to gain weight.

Eating carrots will improve your eyesight and help you see better in the dark

Experts have disagreed on whether carrots improve your eyesight. This theory grew out of the fact carrots contain beta-carotene, which the body converts into vitamin A (which is used for vision, bone growth and skin health). The main issue here is "improve." Like all other vitamins, ingesting an abundance of vitamin A simply helps to maintain health (in this case the health of your retinas) and then your body will either store or eliminate the excess, which can be problematic in some instances. A deficiency of vitamin A can lead to what is called night blindness (which is exactly what it sounds like – an inability to see effectively in low-light situations.)

The actual origin of this myth is quite recent. In World War 2, the Allied Air Force had developed a radar system that pilots could use to find and track enemy aircraft while in the air. In an effort to conceal this secret weapon, the Air Force made a point serving carrots at every pilot's meal and spreading the word that the carrots enabled the pilots to see at night. This deception not only deceived the nazi's but pretty well everyone else as well.