PennState Extension

Totally Veggies

RESOURCE GUIDE
Totally Veggies Resource Guide

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Introduction

Welcome to the Totally Veggies Resource Guide. This guide is meant to help you and your family improve the quantity and variety of vegetables you eat by providing several “how-to” resources for:

- Making vegetables a family affair
- Buying good quality produce at the market
- Handling produce safely
- Cooking veggies using simple cooking techniques

The Totally Veggies Resource Guide is based on research that took place in Pennsylvania and the USDA Dietary Guidelines. The recommended practices have been studied and shown to have positive results. In addition, Totally Veggies is available to health professionals across the United States as a teaching curriculum to help others boost the quantity and variety of vegetables they eat.

To begin, let’s think about why we should eat vegetables.

Why Eat Vegetables?

A report issued by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in July 2015 found that less than 14 percent of American adults consumed the recommended 2 to 3 cups of vegetables each day. Eating more vegetables adds these underconsumed essential nutrients to our diets. Vegetables contain:

- Vitamins A
- Vitamin C
- Vitamin K
- Potassium
- Magnesium
- Fiber

Research has shown that these nutrients reduce the risk for heart disease, stroke, and some cancers. Studies have also shown that nutrients in food work synergistically. Taking supplements is not as beneficial as eating the whole vegetable.

Vegetables can manage body weight when they’re consumed in place of more energy-dense foods. You feel fuller with fewer calories just by substituting vegetables for high-calorie, high-fat foods.

Vegetables also add color, crunch, and flavor to meals and snacks that are not found in other food groups.
Making Vegetables a Family Affair

Picky eaters often reject vegetables and need some encouragement. Here are suggestions.

If two or more like it, serve it again. Often, if one of the adults in the family does not like a vegetable, it does not get served. If an adult and a child like the vegetable dish, then keep it in the family meal offerings, especially with younger children. It may take repeated offerings before a food is accepted—sometimes 10 or more times! Even adults can change their tastes over time.

Make the vegetable interesting. While the optimal goal of eating more vegetables is to enjoy the natural taste of the vegetable, first tastes may be more interesting when accompanied by a dip, cheese, sauce, or salad dressing. Some vegetables are bitter or have a strong flavor that can be off-putting. Choose a cooking or preparation technique that complements the vegetable. Roasted Brussels sprouts are loved by many who would not eat them boiled. Bitter greens are better in a salad when accompanied by fruit or a savory dressing.

Experiment. Take the plunge and purchase an unfamiliar vegetable to serve. Many families eat about 5 vegetables: broccoli, green beans, potatoes, lettuce, and corn. Plan to include the new vegetable in a meal that is not rushed. Find a recipe that sounds appealing. If your family does not eat much of this vegetable, do not give up. Try it again or find another way to cook the vegetable. Get your family involved in experimenting, especially if your children are older or other adults cook too. Holding an “ethnic” meal or “green” dinner can make tasting an adventure for all.

Make vegetable selection easy. We often choose sweet and starchy snacks because they come packaged and are nonperishable. Today, vegetables can be purchased in convenient packaging, too. Lunchbox-size bags of carrots, cut-vegetable medleys for stir-fries, bagged salad and skinned and cut winter squash and green beans that can be cooked in the bag are just a few examples of easy vegetables. Don’t forget canned and frozen vegetables! Fresh, whole vegetables are wonderful, but they do not need to be the only choice. Make your own portion-size bags to keep in the refrigerator for easy afterschool snacks, lunches, and additions to salads or main courses.

Modeling is important. Most children pick up behaviors and preferences from their parents. In families where eating vegetables is expected and enjoyed, children generally do the same. Some adults struggle with eating vegetables but want to eat more. Working on this goal as a team with both adults and children can shift the power of adults from enforcer to team member. Exhibiting a positive attitude is important when choosing new vegetables and recipes. Remember, the two-bite rule applies to everyone.

Enjoy successes. If your family accepts at least one new vegetable or a picky family member now eats more vegetables, consider this a victory toward their good health. You may want to keep a meal diary or checklist to note improvements. Rarely is your family going to move from liking only a few vegetables to eating 2 to 3 cups a day in a short time frame. Keep the momentum going—make vegetables an important part of your meals and snacks by having them on hand and including them in your meal planning.