



Fruits and Vegetables: Health-Promoting Compounds

Study after study shows that higher fruit and vegetable intake is linked to lower chronic disease risk. What makes these foods so powerful? Certainly, the healthful vitamins and minerals play an important role, coupled with the fact that these foods are full of fiber, but plant foods also deliver a variety of health-promoting substances called phytochemicals (also called phytonutrients). The term "phytochemicals" covers thousands of nutrients that deliver a wide range of health benefits to our bodies. Some common phytochemicals include carotenoids (such as beta-carotene, lutein, and lycopene) that give carrots, tomatoes, and watermelon their bright hues and flavonoids that help make red wine and tea such nutrition superstars. Scientists who study phytochemicals are learning more about the beneficial roles they may play in the human body.

Some phytochemicals function as antioxidants. Antioxidants neutralize free radicals, compounds that can damage cells and tissues and induce inflammation. Thus, these phytochemicals can minimize cell damage from free radicals, helping to keep cells healthy and reduce systemic inflammation and the risk of diseases such as cancer and cardiovascular disease. Other nutrients found in fruits and vegetables such as vitamins C and E, which are not phytochemicals, also have antioxidant effects. Phytochemicals can also be beneficial to the immune system and help support gut health.

Consuming whole foods such as fruits, vegetables, nuts, and whole grains, rather than taking isolated phytochemical supplements, can potentially lead to greater health benefits because phytochemicals act synergistically with each other and with vitamins, minerals, and other nutrients in foods.

The color of a fruit or vegetable often hints at its nutrients, especially the phytochemicals it contains. Different phytochemicals and nutrients exert diverse beneficial actions in the body, and the best way to make sure you're getting plenty of these powerful health-promoting compounds is to eat a variety of fruits and vegetables. Create a rainbow of colors on your plate to maximize the variety of phytochemicals in your diet.

Source: Tufts University-School of Nutrition Science and Policy/ Health & Nutrition Newsletter;

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