

## Enjoy a Rainbow of Fruits and Vegetables

March is National Nutrition month and each week we will feature different nutrition topics. This week we will focus on the colors of fruits and vegetables.

Fruits and vegetables benefit our body by providing nutrients that maintain health and may reduce the risk of developing a chronic disease. They provide:

- Fiber, which may reduce the risk of cardiovascular disease and help lower blood glucose.
- Potassium, which helps promote healthy blood pressure and plays an important role in muscle contraction.
- Folate, which helps in the formation of red blood cells and is especially important during pregnancy. Folate also plays an important role in cell growth and can also prevent anemia.
- Vitamin A, C, and E which help in the growth and repair of body tissues and help maintain healthy eye and skin.

Have you ever wondered why fruits and vegetables are so colorful? The color is an important indicator that those fruits and vegetables have certain nutrients that have a health benefit. "The color of fruits and vegetables is an important indicator of their nutrient content and their underlying health benefits" says Dr. Sumathi Venkatesh, a Health Specialist with Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service. Each color implies specific phytonutrients present in them. Phytonutrients are natural compounds produced by plants that are present in foods such as fruits, vegetables, beans, and grains. A few notable phytonutrients that we get from these foods are beta-carotene, lycopene, lutein, resveratrol, anthocyanins, and isoflavones. Phytonutrients have antioxidant and anti-inflammatory properties. Consuming a diet rich in phytonutrients will improve blood circulation and heart health, promote bone and joint health, and strengthen the immune system to fight against infections and diseases.

### There are five main color groups:

1. **Red** e.g., tomatoes, pink grapefruit, red peppers, watermelon, strawberries, cranberries, raspberries, cherries, red cabbage, apples, beets, red grapes, and red onions. These colors contain lycopene and anthocyanins. They may promote urinary tract health, memory function, lower risk of some cancers, and heart health.
2. **Orange and yellow** e.g., carrots, yellow pears, yellow peppers, corn, winter squash, sweet potatoes, oranges, peaches, cantaloupe, and apricots. These colors contain beta carotene and limonoids. They promote vision health, heart health, immune system resistance and lowers risk of some cancers.
3. **Green** e.g., asparagus, zucchini, artichokes, broccoli, avocado, green peppers, green beans, spinach, kale, kiwi, brussels sprouts, cabbage, green tea, and green herbs. These contain lutein and promote vision health, lower risk of some cancers, and helps maintain strong bones and teeth.
4. **Blue and purple** e.g., eggplant, purple cabbage, black beans, blueberries, blackberries, purple grapes, plums, prunes, figs, and raisins. The contain anthocyanins and phenols. They may help promote memory function, lower risks of some cancers, urinary tract health, and promotes healthy aging.
5. **White and brown** e.g., cauliflower, mushrooms, onions, parsnip, radish, garlic, leeks, black-eyed peas, and bananas. These foods contain allicin and quercetin. They also promote heart health, healthy cholesterol levels and lower risks of some cancers.

Everyone should include a variety of colored fruits and vegetables in their diet. For a 2000 calorie diet, you should eat at least 2 cups of fruits and 2½ cups of vegetables including dark green, red-orange, beans, peas, and lentils, starchy vegetables, and other vegetables.

Simply fill half your plate with colored fruits and vegetables in fresh, frozen, canned, and dried forms to meet your daily recommended amounts. Try not to peel fruits and vegetables that have edible skin because the skin is a good source of dietary fiber, vitamins, minerals, and antioxidants. While preparing your shopping list try to include at least one fruit and one vegetable from each color. Eating home cooked meals as often as possible will allow you to cut your food cost and choose healthy ingredients for your meals. Check out [www.dinnertonight.org](http://www.dinnertonight.org) to learn more on health and nutrition, and for useful tips on healthy recipes, meal planning, freezing leftovers, and food safety.