

WEEKLY WELLNESS TIP

12 Baby Steps to Better Nutrition

Source: <http://www.mnn.com/health/fitness-well-being/sponsorstory/12-baby-steps-to-better-nutrition>

Most of us think that making a commitment to healthier eating means cutting out our favorite foods and depriving ourselves of the stuff we love most. Actually, the opposite is true. Eating right is all about expanding your food choices, so you bring more options to the table, so to speak, and consume a more balanced (yet still delicious) variety that delivers the crucial nutrients your body craves without depriving yourself, says Lauren Schmitt, RD, a busy mom, registered dietitian, and owner of Healthy Eating and Training, a food counseling center in Los Angeles. Need some convincing? Try some of these sneaky nutrition-boosting strategies, which Schmitt recommends to her clients. Some have to do with shopping choices, others are simple food prep and serving techniques even non-cooks can master. They'll help you and your family to feel fitter, have more energy, and never again equate a healthy diet with deprivation again.

1. Rearrange Your Plate

When most of us picture a meal comprised of meat, veggies, and a starch, we imagine meat taking up the biggest portion of the plate. But studies consistently show that eating less meat and more plant food is linked to a longer, healthier life. So flip that image in your mind and start making food grown in the ground your main course. You'll still be eating the same things, but the healthier ratio will slash calories and fat.

2. Go a Little (Wal)nuts

Every time you munch on a walnut, you consume nutrients like omega-3 fatty acids that are believed to protect against cancer and heart disease. Eat them raw, crumble them over a salad or dessert, or buy them chopped and add them to breading for chicken or fish.

3. Eat Adventurously

It's easy to stick to your favorite meal staples—but why not explore your local market and vow to sample an exotic new fruit, seafood, or other product once a week? Grocery stores carry an amazing assortment of choices these days from all over the world and discover new favorites to accompany your old standbys.

4. Sneak in Spinach

Spinach can go pretty much any place you usually put lettuce (such as BLTs, burgers, salads, tacos), and taste-wise, it's hard to know the difference. But your body will thank you for the laundry list of powerful nutrients the darker green leaf delivers. In addition to being an excellent source of several vitamins, minerals, and antioxidants, spinach has been shown to have cancer-fighting properties.

5. Sprinkle on Cinnamon

This breakfast-friendly spice is packed with lots of disease-fighting antioxidants and can even cut down on inflammation associated with body aches and illnesses. Oatmeal, cold cereal, granola, toast... they'll all taste better with a little cinnamon dashed on top, but there're no extra calories.

6. Buy Produce That's Already Prepped

They're a little pricier, but fruits and veggies that have been prewashed and pre-cut can mean the difference between the good stuff making it into your mouth vs. sitting in a crisper drawer. Containers of cut-up fruits like pineapple, watermelon, and grapes are perfect as snacks or a side dish with your lunch, and kids love them too. Plus, veggies that are already peeled, chopped, and packaged in microwave steamer bags can be added to your evening meal instantly.

7. Toss in a Turnip

Making mashed potatoes? Alone, the taters pack vitamin C, vitamin B6, and potassium, but smashing a turnip into the mix raises the level of vitamin C even higher, plus adds antioxidants and vitamin A. If you chop the greens from the top of the turnip and throw those in to the dish too, you'll get good-for-you calcium, copper, and iron.

8. Make Room for Mushrooms

Next time you're sautéing ground beef, use a little less meat and fill out the pan with a handful of mushrooms. Not only will you decrease the amount of total fat and cholesterol in your meal, you'll be gaining Vitamin D—a nutrient that's relatively rare in food—plus lots of superhero antioxidants. You can also easily sauté mushrooms in olive oil and add them to canned spaghetti sauce or sprinkle a bunch to health up a frozen cheese pizza.

9. Do a Dip

If your family is full of stubborn veggie-avoiders, dips are a great solution. Salsa, hummus, guacamole, white bean, spinach, and avocado dips are all made from vegetables or legumes blended in a food processor. When scooped up on tortilla or pita chips, the anti-vegetable crowd won't realize they're actually consuming plant food—and reaping the high nutritional content too.

10. Cook Carrots Whole

Boosting nutrition doesn't get much easier than this: Instead of chopping carrots before you put them in the oven or on a stove-top pan, slice them after they've been cooked. Researchers in the UK found that doing this will raise their antioxidant content by as much as 25 percent. The reason: chopping them beforehand increases the amount of exposed surface area, and that allows more nutrients to escape during cooking.

11. Opt for Organic

The jury is still out as to whether or not eating organic will make you healthier, but most people agree that certain organic fruits and vegetables (apples, strawberries and tomatoes in particular) pack more flavor than their conventionally grown counterparts—and are therefore way more fun to eat. The same goes for farmer's market produce. If your typical response to biting into a tomato is "eh," sink your teeth into an organic heirloom one and you'll be in for a scrumptious surprise.

12. Pop Open a Can of Pumpkin

Check the very back of your cabinets—you probably already have a few cans of pumpkin left over from last Thanksgiving or Christmas. By adding a cup of the low-calorie, fiber-rich purée to any pancake or muffin batter, or even using it to replace half the oil in brownie batter, you'll be scoring Vitamins A, C, and E, plus multiple disease-fighting antioxidants. And pumpkin flavor gives a nice natural sweetness kids love.