**Day 5 Vegetables**

**Title: Vital Vegetables**

How many times in your life have you been nagged to eat your vegetables? Probably more times than you’d like to remember. We’re not here to nag. But we are going to talk about how amazing vegetables are.

First, vegetables naturally have few calories and very little fat. Second, they all provide some sort of vitamin or mineral that helps our bodies to perform important tasks, like repairing cells, building muscles, and helping nerves and muscles to communicate. Third, fiber! Some vegetables also have lots of fiber, which can contribute to a healthy and regular gut.

And the most amazing part of all, many studies have found that a diet full of vegetables can help prevent some serious diseases and conditions, such as heart disease, stroke, and some types of cancer (like bowel, lung, and stomach). While there is no magic vegetable that can prevent all types of illness, eating a variety of vegetables each day throughout our lives can certainly decrease our risk of developing diseases. A diet full of vegetables can also help you live a healthy life at a healthy weight.

**How many vegetables should I eat each day?**

The amount of vegetables you should eat each day depends upon your age, gender, and how much activity you get each day. Because vegetables are so low in calories, eating more than what is recommended is fine, just as long as you still maintain a balanced diet and get enough of other food groups.

[CALLOUT] Based on your age, sex, and general activity level, you should eat [X] cups of vegetables each day. [/CALLOUT]

Any type of vegetable can contribute to your daily vegetable goal. If you drink vegetable juice, keep it to one cup per day. Juicing removes fiber, and most people don’t get enough fiber already.

Over one week, it’s important to get a variety of different types of vegetables. One way to think of vegetable variety is by thinking about the different colors. Different colored vegetables add different vitamins and minerals to your diet. Eat across all the different types by creating colorful meals.

**What counts as a cup?**

One cup of vegetables can be:

* 1 cup of raw or cooked vegetables
* 1 cup of vegetable juice
* 2 cups of raw, leafy greens.

**How can I eat more vegetables?**

The best way to eat more vegetables is to fill half of your plate with vegetables. Eat your vegetables first, followed by your grains and protein. If you’re still hungry after eating, go back and eat more vegetables. But you can also make small, simple changes that really add up.

* Prepare vegetables ahead of time to have a quick, ready-to-go snack waiting for you when you’re hungry. Get baby carrots or other pre-cut vegetables at the grocery. Or, spend a little time to wash and cut up vegetables, such as peppers, celery, or carrots, and put them in the refrigerator where you can see them once you open the doors.
* Think of times where you could swap out one food for some vegetables. Eat tomato-based sauce instead of a cream based sauce with your whole wheat pasta. Or swap out pita bread for vegetables next time you eat hummus. Try carrots, sliced bell peppers, celery, or any other raw vegetable that has a nice crunch.
* Where can you add vegetables? Make an omelette with mushrooms, onions, and peppers. Add grated zucchini, carrots, or squash to tomato sauce or meatloaf. Add vegetables to a pizza.

**A final word**

Vegetables are a great source of vitamins, minerals, fiber, and other important things that contribute to good health. They’re low in calories, fat, and sodium. If vegetables haven’t been your thing, try giving them a second chance.

There is still plenty to learn about this important component of your diet. Tomorrow we’ll learn more about the variety of vegetables and how to prepare them for optimal nutrition.

**Sources:**

Mann, J., and Stewart Truswell, A. (Eds.). (2012). Essentials of Human Nutrition (4th ed.). New York: Oxford University Press.

USDA Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion. (2015, February 12). All About the Vegetable Group. Retrieved September 10, 2015, from <http://www.choosemyplate.gov/vegetables>