

Health Benefits of Fruit and Vegetables



Teacher Fact Sheet

General Information

Source: World Health Organisation

Low intake of fruit and vegetables is among the top 10 risk factors for disease. According to the World Health Organisation, millions of lives worldwide could be saved each year if people ate enough fruits and vegetables. Eating fruits and vegetables every day could help prevent:

- Heart Disease/Stroke
- Certain Cancers
- Type II Diabetes
- Obesity

Low intake of fruits and vegetables worldwide is estimated to cause 31% of ischaemic heart disease (heart attack), 19% gastrointestinal cancer, and 11% of stroke.

The World Health Organisation recommends a minimum consumption of 5-10 portions of fruit and vegetables per day, where a portion is approximated as a handful. So a small apple would count as one portion for a 6 year old child, as would a handful of grapes or a handful of chopped carrots.

The Irish Lifestyle

It is established scientific fact that people who eat lots of fruit and vegetables are less likely to get certain non-communicable diseases (e.g. cancer, heart disease, stroke, type II diabetes). This may be one reason why people in Ireland are particularly prone to chronic degenerative illnesses. Forty percent of Irish people die from heart disease, and 25% die from cancer. We are one of the worst countries in Western Europe (i.e. the pre-accession states) for heart disease mortality. Our consumption of fruits and vegetables is low. Even more worryingly, the amount of fruit and vegetables Irish people eat is falling. For example, only 36% of school age girls and 29% of boys in Ireland eat at least one piece of fruit per day. Put another way, roughly 2/3 of Irish children do not eat fruit on a daily basis. Irish school children are also consuming fewer vegetables. Specific benefits have been identified for apples (protection against heart disease and certain cancers), cabbage and other cruciferous vegetables like broccoli (which may protect against certain cancers), tomatoes (protection against prostate cancer), and nuts (protective against heart disease and type II diabetes). Further individual benefits have been identified for kale, blueberries, raspberries, garlic, almonds and other fruits/vegetables.

It is not sensible to recommend specific “super” foods, since the scientific evidence strongly suggests that health benefits almost certainly result from the consumption of a wide range of different fruits and vegetables. However, a balanced diet that includes a wide variety of fruits and vegetables and minimal processed food would be expected to reduce the risk of a range of chronic degenerative illnesses. In addition, a diet rich in unprocessed food makes it easier for the body to regulate appetite, and usually helps people to avoid being overweight/obese. On the other side of the coin, it has been conclusively demonstrated that a fast-food diet increases the risk of obesity and type II diabetes.

Fruits, vegetables and other plant foods tend to be rich in antioxidants and other phytochemicals (pronounced *fight-o-chemicals*). Antioxidants consumed in food inhibit damaging reactions within the human body and have a beneficial effect upon health. By reducing free-radical damage, antioxidants reduce inflammation, promote cardiac health, and reduce the risk of neuro-degenerative diseases like Alzheimer’s and Parkinson’s disease. Many studies also show that some plant phytochemicals are anti-proliferative – they slow or prevent the growth of some cancer cells. Recent research suggests that plant constituents increase sensitivity to insulin, which may help delay the onset of type II diabetes. Chronic inflammation may be the root cause of degenerative illnesses like heart disease (where it is now clear that cholesterol is certainly not the only issue). It is likely that eating fruit and vegetables regularly can prevent chronic inflammation, and this may contribute significantly to their beneficial effects. Many fruits contain salicylate...a close relative of a common anti-inflammatory drug (aspirin).

Studies show that taking antioxidant supplements (e.g. vitamin pills) does not protect health. By way of contrast, regular consumption of fruits and vegetables clearly has a beneficial effect upon health. For example, people who regularly consume apples tend to get less heart disease and certain cancers. The phrase “an apple a day keeps the doctor away” is now strongly supported by scientific evidence. Many different studies show beneficial effects for a range of different fruits, vegetables, oils, nuts and herbs. This effect is the net result of different beneficial components of the food working together in ways that scientists don’t quite understand yet. In summary, a diet rich in fruits and vegetables significantly reduces the risk of heart disease, stroke, type II diabetes, some types of cancer, obesity and Alzheimer’s disease. This effect can be further increased by including wholegrain foods, nuts and certain oils (e.g. omega-3 fish oils, olive oil) in the diet.

For more information or for more detailed references contact RedBranch.

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