

Health Benefits of Fruit and Vegetables



Teacher Factsheet

General Information

Source: World Health Organisation

Low intake of fruit and veg is among the top 10 risk factors for disease. 2.7 million lives 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 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

We know that people who eat lots of fruit and vegetables are less likely to get certain diseases (like cancer, heart disease, and stroke). This may be the reason why people in Ireland are particularly prone to these diseases. Forty percent of Irish people die from heart disease, and 25% die from cancer. Our consumption of fruits and vegetables is low. Even more worryingly, the amount of fruit and veg we 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 age 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), nuts (protective against heart disease and type II diabetes)...the list goes on, and includes kale, blueberries, raspberries, garlic and almonds. It is impossible to recommend specific "super" foods, since the scientific evidence strongly suggests that health benefits almost certainly come from consuming a wide range of different foods. 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 overweight and obesity. On the other side of the coin, it has been shown conclusively 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 lots of nasty illnesses like heart disease...we now know that cholesterol is certainly NOT the only issue. It is likely that eating fruit and veg regularly can prevent this chronic inflammation. Many fruits for example contain salicylate...a close relative of a familiar anti-inflammatory drug that we are all familiar with (aspirin!).

Studies show that taking antioxidant supplements (i.e. pills) does NOT protect your health...in fact, you can get too much of a good thing if you take supplements. By way of contrast, consumption of real food has a very beneficial effect upon health. For example, people who regularly consume apples tend to get less heart disease and certain cancers...maybe an apple a day really does keep the doctor away...and 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. The bottom line is that if our diet is rich in wholegrain, fruits, vegetables and nuts (and certain oils) we reduce our risk of heart disease, stroke, type II diabetes, some types of cancer and Alzheimer's disease.

For more information contact RedBranch.