

EMBRACE NATURE'S BOUNTY

The produce aisle is packed with nutrient-dense foods, but many of us aren't taking advantage of them. As so much research—as well as human history—shows, that's a mistake.

BY HOLLY PEVZNER

There could not be a simpler, clearer piece of healthy-eating advice than “Eat more produce.” There's no weighing or measuring involved. No checking food labels. Beyond the refrigerator, there are no special kitchen appliances required. And for those with backyards, access to a community garden or even a sunny windowsill, certain fruits and vegetables could be there for the taking. Eating more plants, for those with the means and access, should be easy, but it's not. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, only about 12 percent of adults in the U.S. consume the recommended amount of fruit a day, and a mere 9 percent hit the vegetable target. The goal: about 5 servings daily total between the two food groups.

This collective shunning of fruits and vegetables is kicking our health and well-being directly

in the teeth. “When we don't make plants a priority, we wind up consuming a diet that's nutrient-poor and calorie-dense,” says Desiree Nielsen, R.D., the author of *Eat More Plants*. “This leads to weight gain, poor gut health, heart disease, type 2 diabetes and more.” And it's not just about what we're eating instead of plants; it's also about what we're missing out on by not eating plants. “Produce is packed with phytochemicals, vitamins and minerals that you can't make up for with a multivitamin,” says Walter Willett, M.D., a professor of epidemiology and nutrition at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health in Boston. “While supplements have their place, they come nowhere close to replacing the benefits of eating fruits and vegetables.”

The thing is, we already know this. Eighty percent of respondents in a 2017 survey from the

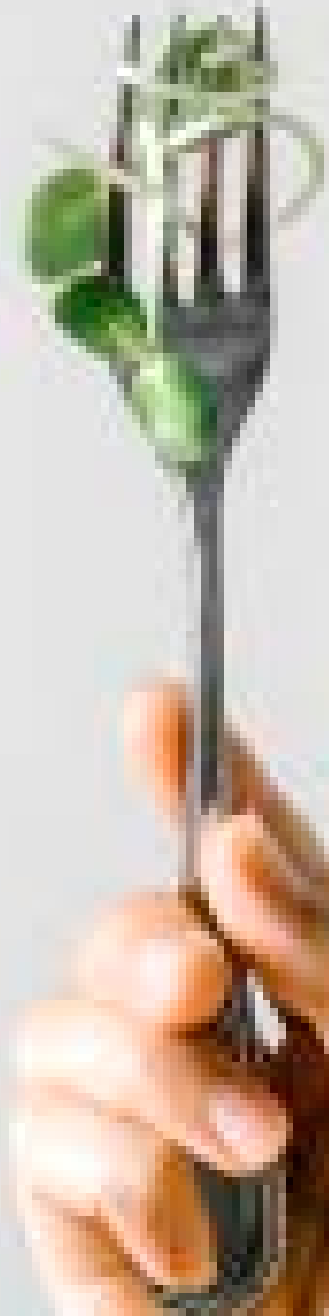


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Produce for Better Health (PBH) Foundation ranked “eating more vegetables” as the number one dietary factor for good health. Our less-than-stellar eating habits are more complicated than an imaginary knowing gap. To understand how we got here, first consider where we used to be.

Our Journey with Plants

Human history is marked by times when plants were not only held in high regard but sought after as well. “Our hunting-and-gathering ancestors were, for the most part, psyched to have food at all,” says Barb Stuckey, a food developer and the author of *Taste What You’re Missing*. While there’s this notion that we used to dine on the meat of animals that we killed ourselves, the reality is that “eating meat simply wasn’t a daily occurrence,” says Nielsen. What was: consuming any plant, nut, seed or grain that could be picked or foraged. “Back then, grains and mush [gruel such as porridge or oatmeal] were staples, so when comparing those flavors to those of fresh fruits and vegetables, the latter was significantly more desirable,” says Stuckey.

Fast-forward from *The Flintstones* to the era of *Little House on the Prairie*. Mas and Pas across the country relied on their gardens to feed their families. “Crops were usually ‘free,’ so we filled up a huge part of our diets with them as we struggled to make it over the centuries,” says Sharon Palmer, R.D., the author of the blog *The Plant-Powered Dietitian*. It wasn’t about following guidelines and striving for better health. It was about survival.

Then came post-World War II innovation and modernization, which led to a boom in supermarkets—and in the processed foods required to stock the shelves. “We also needed to grow sturdy crops to withstand shipping and store shelf life,” says Stuckey. “Flavor was secondary, and it suffered. It’s still suffering.” As convenience and wealth accumulated, homegrown and fresh foods fell more out of favor. Take the legume (beans, peas, lentils, chickpeas). “For centuries, we relied significantly on legumes as the backbone of our diet. They’re rich in protein and fiber and very cheap,” says Palmer. “However, with wealth people started trading beans for meat.” You see, a steak on the table showed you were doing well. A bean dish, however, implied the opposite.

Later our attention turned from perceived wealth to perceived health. “The low-fat, hyper-processed era of the 1980s and ’90s was a disaster,” says Nielsen. “Our fear of fat, combined with the evolution of food manufacturing and an increase in eating out, led to a dramatic shift in diet, which meant consuming even fewer plant-based foods.”

The State of the Plate Now

“Today a lot of our wellness is synonymous with ‘free’: dairy-free, gluten-free, carb-free,” notes Nielsen. “But we’d all be better off if we were more concerned about what we ate—namely, whole, fresh foods—as opposed to what we avoided.” Nevertheless, hope is budding. Over the past 10 years, there’s been a 66 percent increase in the number of farmers’ markets dotting the U.S. In 2017, retail giant Amazon purchased Whole Foods Market, sending a clear message that the masses are interested in healthy eating. According to the Department of Agriculture, American consumption of legumes has been trending upward. And children of all ages—as well as adults between 18 and 44—are steadily eating more fruit, according to a 2015 report from PBH. “I see positive trends too,” says Palmer. “Right now, there’s a sense that plant-forward food, rich with healthy fats and global flavors, can be delicious. And it appeals to people without even the notion that these foods are healthy.” That’s a very good thing, especially right now.

“We’ve never needed plant-forward diets more,” says Nielsen. We demand so much from our bodies and minds. We live in chaotic and polluted cities; we eat so much processed food; we work long hours; we parent harder than we used to. “All of this places enormous stress on our bodies, creating an abundance of free-radical damage,” says Nielsen. “This damage is, essentially, the waste our body creates in its cells.” Consuming antioxidants and phytochemicals helps the body make less waste and clean up the mess, but we’re not eating enough plants to get the job done. “Over time, damage

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accumulates in our DNA,” she says. “We age prematurely, our skin suffers, we don’t recover from illness or exercise like we should, and over 10, 20, 30 years it plays a large role in whether we suffer from things like arthritis, cancer, heart disease and dementia.” Plus, skimping on plants means we miss out on naturally filling, high-volume foods that our bodies need to regulate appetite. In fact, eating a plant-forward diet that’s not totally vegetarian significantly reduces one’s chances of being overweight or obese in middle age, according to recent long-term research presented at the European Congress on Obesity in Vienna.

So What’s Holding Us Back?

While 75 percent of people note that they’d like to include a greater variety of vegetables in their family’s meals, they are all tripping over the same obstacles, according to the 2017 PBH report noted earlier: the burden factor, the preferences factor and the stumped factor. Not only did the PBH report find that 30 percent of people believe that eating more veggies each day is a chore, but a 2018 study in the journal *Appetite* found that perceived (not actual) time constraints negatively

influence the quality of household food purchases. “We need to give up the belief that it’s complicated or that we don’t have time to prepare veggies or legumes,” notes Nielsen. “Feeding yourself well doesn’t have to take more than 20 to 30 minutes most days.”

Your biggest eat-more hurdle might just be your personal biases and unfamiliarity. Many of us grew up eating canned lima beans, steamed Brussels sprouts and microwaved cauliflower, and decided decades ago that we weren’t fans. Or we lived in a household where not a single beet, black bean or kumquat ever appeared. “It takes time and effort to discover and rediscover plant-based foods,” says Nielsen. “Trying to cram it all into a busy week can make everything too complicated.” So don’t. Instead, save your experimentation for

the weekend. “Set a weekend goal to go to the grocery store, and pick up a fruit, vegetable or legume that you’ve never eaten before—or that you haven’t tried in eons,” says Nielsen. “Thanks to Google, you can easily figure out what it goes best with and how to make it.”

Maximizing the Rewards

Two seemingly conflicting eat-your-fruits-and-vegetables studies came out in 2017: one from the *International Journal of Epidemiology* touted 10 servings a day for max benefit, and the other, from *The Lancet*, noted that 3 to 4 servings was actually best. Despite these reports, our most recent dietary guidelines recommend that one-half of your plate be fruits and vegetables, the equivalent of about 5 servings. One serving of leafy vegetables equates to 1 cup raw, and 1 serving of fruit is about 1 medium whole fruit. For other fresh, frozen or canned fruits and vegetables, ½ cup equals a serving. “There’s likely some benefit of eating more—and it’s certainly better to have 3 or 4 servings than none. But your best bet is still 5 servings a day,” says Dr. Willett. And make those servings really count. “While it’s not an exact science, if you’re eating mostly iceberg lettuce, potatoes and cantaloupe, you can’t compare to someone eating beans, berries, broccoli and spinach,” says Willett.

Legumes, for instance, are a powerful, fiber-rich plant-based protein that can take the place of meat, which really amps health. “They should be a daily staple,” says Nielsen. “Their fiber feeds beneficial bacteria in the gut and regulates digestion.” Plus, a 2015 study in the *European Journal of Clinical Nutrition* found that eating 1 cup of legumes daily for just three months was associated with lower blood sugar, cholesterol and blood pressure. While increasing vegetable intake, full stop, is recommended for overall health and reducing heart disease risk, Willett notes that eating leafy greens and cruciferous and dark-orange vegetables can have the most impact. For instance, a 2018 report in the journal *Nutrients* noted that upping your intake of leafy greens (like spinach, collard greens and arugula) and cruciferous veggies (like kale, broccoli, bok choy and Brussels sprouts) provides the “greatest cardiovascular health benefits.” And eating 1.3 servings of leafy greens a day



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is associated with slower age-related cognitive decline, found a 2017 study in the journal *Neurology*. Compared with those who ate the lowest amount (.09 serving daily), those who ate the most showed a rate of decline that was equivalent to being 11 years younger cognitively.

“There’s good evidence that the results are at least partly due to an antioxidant class called carotenoids,” says Willett, who was not involved in the study. The presence of carotenoids is also why orange veggies, like carrots, winter squash, sweet potatoes and peppers, are must-eats. “We see about a 50 percent lower risk of estrogen receptor-negative breast cancers among women who have the highest blood levels of carotenoids,” says Willett. “That’s pretty powerful.”

And, yes, all fruit is great for your health, but Willett says that berries are a standout. Not only are they packed with fiber, but as a whole, they contain nearly 10 times as many antioxidants on average as other fruits and vegetables. Women who consume at least 1 serving of blueberries and

2 servings of strawberries weekly may slow their brain’s aging by more than two years, notes research in the *Annals of Neurology*. And those who bump that weekly intake to 3 or more servings may experience a 34 percent reduced risk of a heart attack, notes a 2013 study in the journal *Circulation*. All of that can be super-motivating, but what’s often more so: immediate results.

“When I first wrote about eating for health, it was all about helping to prevent cancer and heart disease. That’s where the data was,” says Willett. “But I started getting letters from people—a lot of people—saying thank you. That changing their diets to include more plants changed their lives. They had more energy. Their glucose was under control. They were empowered.” And the thing is, it didn’t take that long. “Once you start eating a balanced plant-forward diet, you’ll start to feel really, really good very quickly,” says Nielsen. “And you’ll start to connect your healthy food choices to feeling great, which becomes its own motivation.” ●