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## **Eat More Fruits and Vegetables: 5 to 9 A Day**

It seems it was not that long ago that the phrase “5 A Day” was introduced into the nutrition vocabulary. Gradually, many of us began to make an effort to increase the number of servings of fruits and vegetables we ate each day. Recently, though, we have been hearing that “5 A Day” may not be enough to ensure a nutritious diet. The new catch phrase is “Eat 5 to 9 a Day for Better Health.”

Every five years, the Departments of Agriculture and Health and Human Services jointly publish recommendations derived from the latest scientific studies of nutrition. The “Dietary Guidelines for Americans” is designed to address dietary concerns for people two years of age and older, giving advice about good dietary habits that can “promote health and reduce risk for major chronic diseases.” The latest version of this report has just been released in 2005.

The evidence continues to mount that the role of fruits and vegetables in our diet is an extremely important one, especially in preventing disease and promoting optimal health. Studies have shown that fruits and vegetables are great sources of vitamins, minerals, and fiber, and they contain phytochemicals that work together in the body to protect against certain diseases. Five or more servings of fruits and vegetables a day have been shown to lower the risk of certain cancers, heart disease, and stroke, while reducing high blood pressure and helping to manage weight. In addition, poor diets have been linked to osteoporosis, type 2 diabetes, constipation, iron deficiency anemia, and diverticular diseases.

In promoting the recommendations of the 2005 guidelines, the American Dietetic Association has adopted the theme “Get a Taste for Nutrition” for March, which is National Nutrition Month. The ADA advises Americans to make healthy changes to their diet by choosing a variety of foods, reducing salt consumption, opting for whole grains (including starchy vegetables), including healthy fats in the diet while reducing unhealthy fats (fats from flaxseed, walnuts, salmon, sardines, and tuna are examples of good fats), and being mindful of portion size.

The National Cancer Institute agrees with the ADA. In choosing a variety of foods, they recommend a diet that regularly includes foods from five color groups: Green (leafy, peas, broccoli, grapes, apples, honeydew, beans, etc.), Orange/yellow (carrots, squash, cantaloupe, oranges, peaches, sweet potatoes, etc), Red (tomato products, red onions, peppers, pink grapefruit, red grapes, berries, etc), Blue/purple (eggplant, purple grapes, blueberries, plums, figs, etc), and White (cauliflower, mushrooms, onions, garlic, ginger, bananas, pears, etc).

While eating 5 to 9 servings of fruits and vegetables a day sounds like a lot at first, the range is suggested so that diets can be adjusted according to individual calorie needs. Another point to keep in mind is that a serving is actually smaller than most people think. For example, a serving of orange juice is 6 ounces, yet individual cartons often come in 12-ounce sizes. One carton, then, is actually 2 servings. A large salad may be the equivalent of 2 or 3 servings. So one method to increase the daily number of servings of fruits and vegetables is to simply consume 2 or 3 servings at a time, such as a large glass of juice in the

morning, and a large salad at lunch. When preparing meals, read the labels on the food packages to determine what amount constitutes a serving size.

Another way to increase your consumption of fruits and vegetables is to make them the focus of your meal. Create dishes that center on the vegetable rather than treating them as a side dish. Instead, use meats and starches to enhance the fruit or vegetable main event. Other helpful suggestions to increase the number of fruit and vegetable servings is to begin each day with a piece of fruit or a glass of juice, to snack on fruits and vegetables throughout the day, to add fresh or frozen vegetables to your favorite main dishes, and to include or substitute fruits in desserts.

While “5 to 9 A Day” may not be as catchy as “5 A Day,” the difference in health promotion and disease prevention is worth the effort it takes to remember to increase the daily number of servings of fruits and vegetables in our diets. The full report “Dietary Guidelines for Americans 2005” is available on line at [www.health.gov/dietaryguidelines](http://www.health.gov/dietaryguidelines) , or by calling the US. Department of Health and Human Services at 1-877-696-6775. Additional information about diet, portion size, label reading, and other nutritional matters is available by contacting the American Dietetic Association at 1-800-366-1655 ([www.eatright.org](http://www.eatright.org) ). Further information about this or any other public health concern may be available at the Central Connecticut Health District at 860-721-2822 ([www.ccthd.org](http://www.ccthd.org)).