Eat Your Veggies

Everyone who talks, writes, or preaches about nutrition puts fruits and vegetables at the pinnacle of goodness. While they may lack magical powers, most are excellent sources of potassium (which helps lower blood pressure), vitamins (like A and C), fibre (which helps the digestive system run smoothly), and other nutrients. And when we fill up on low-calorie fruits and veggies, our diets have less room for junk. What’s more, people who eat more produce have a lower risk of heart disease and stroke.

For 70 years, various incarnations of Canada’s Food Guide have exhorted Canadians to fill up on fruits and vegetables. Yet most people still aren’t eating enough.

After rising by roughly 50 per cent between 1970 and 2001, vegetable consumption levelled off at a sorry 1½ servings per person per day (excluding white potatoes, potato chips, and fries). And fruit consumption has risen steadily, though very modestly, since 1970...to an underwhelming three-quarters of a serving a day. (We don’t count fruit juice, since it lacks the fibre that’s in whole fruit and since liquid calories promote weight gain.)

According to a comprehensive survey of the dietary intakes of more than 30,000 people in 2004, only one-quarter of Canadians are getting even four of the four to ten servings a day of fruits and vegetables that the 2007 Food Guide recommends. And those servings include potatoes and fruit juice.

If we’re serious about getting people to eat more fruits and vegetables, we need better strategies.

Let me suggest a few:

- Stop taxing fruits and vegetables, no matter where they are sold. Salads and sliced veggies or fruit get slapped with a tax of 13 per cent or more in most provinces, and at least 5 per cent everywhere else. And steamed broccoli gets the same treatment at restaurants as potatoes. (French fries and potato chips should be excluded from the no-tax deal.)
- Generously subsidize and widely expand breakfast and lunch programs like the BC School Fruit & Vegetable Nutritional Program. Sometimes, feeding kids the right stuff is cheaper than fancy nutrition cheering programs. And, for too long, many schools have been selling junk food to students to raise money. That should stop.
- Teach kids and young adults how to cook at school, at home, and on university and college campuses when they strike out on their own.
- Mandate front-of-package nutrition ratings on labels for all foods. Colour coding (red-yellow-green) or a numerical rating, for example, would help shoppers see how well fruits and vegetables stack up against just about any other food.

If we don’t implement these kinds of programs and policies now, Canadians likely will still be eating low—or even lower—amounts of fruits and vegetables in the years ahead. And that will mean even higher rates of obesity, diabetes, and other health problems.

Michael F. Jacobson, PhD
Executive Director
Centre for Science in the Public Interest