

Eat the rainbow

What are the nutritional benefits of having different coloured foods? BROOKE EVANS-BUTLER reports

While we all know it is important to eat your vegies, did you know there are many positives from eating a rainbow of different coloured fruit and vegetables?

“When you eat a colourful variety of fruit and vegetables, you get a range of phytonutrients, such as antioxidants and flavonoids from the different colours,” says Margaret Hays, dietitian at The Nutrition Specialists in Innaloo.

Charlene Grosse, advanced accredited practising dietitian and spokeswoman for the Dietitians Association of Australia, says while there is an overlap of some of the nutrients of fruit and vegetables, the different colours tend to depict different antioxidants or compounds the foods may contain.

“An example of this is ‘red’ foods like tomatoes and watermelon, contain lycopene,” she says.

“This is suggested to be helpful in boosting heart health and lowering risk of cancer occurrence, such as prostate cancer.”

Ms Hays says by eating a rainbow of vegetables and fruits you’re creating variety and interest — so you’re more likely to stick with the healthy eating plan.

“You are casting your (nutritional) net wider,” Ms Hays says.

“If you eat half a cup of broccoli you might find it boring but if you eat a range of coloured vegetables,

such as a colourful salad, then you get a range of different flavours and textures, and it is more appealing.”

PURPLE

Ms Grosse says purple foods contain anthocyanins, which are powerful antioxidants.

“These have the potential to help to protect cells from damage, and may reduce the occurrence of heart issues and cancer,” she says. “Purple vegetables, such as beetroot, radishes, and carrots, also contain nitrates, and this has been suggested to help reduce blood pressure and may assist in boosting physical performance.”

Get more in your diet

Ms Hays offers her tips to boost the amount of rainbow fruit and veg in your diet:

- Don’t leave your vegetables to one meal
- Make vegies your go-to snack; they are easy to munch on and will fill you up
- Always include vegetables in your lunch and dinner and at these meals, make sure half of your plate is made up of colourful vegetables
- Add a vegetable or two to your breakfast; think tasty omelettes with hearty mushrooms and spinach or breakfast wraps with added goodies such as leftover roast pumpkin.
- Yummy soups are an easy way to get lots of vegetables into a meal or eat delicious salads as the weather warms up

GREEN

You’ve been told to eat your greens for good reason, says Ms Grosse.

“Green vegies are an excellent source of folate, which is important during pregnancy, as well as vitamin C, non-haem iron and phytonutrients, helping to boost your immune system,” she says.

“The phytonutrients could also provide some benefits in lowering risk of eye disease, cancer development and help promote healthy blood vessels.”

ORANGE

“Orange fruit and veg help to pack a nutrition punch, due to their high content of betacarotene, which can be converted by the body into vitamin A,” Ms Grosse says.

“This vitamin is beneficial for helping with vision, immune function and reproduction. So it definitely provides an all-round boost for health.”

RED

Ms Grosse says red fruit and vegetables not only contain lycopene, but also have vitamin A, vitamin C and are low in energy and high in fibre.

“It’s important to note that cooking foods can in some ways make it even healthier, and taste even better,” she says.

“When vegetables are heated, their nutrients are more easily accessible and digestible. For example, we know heating and cooking tomatoes actually boosts the absorption of lycopene, an antioxidant that gives them their bright red colour.

“There’s also evidence that cooking vegies in extra virgin olive oil (such as roasting vegetables in the oven) boosts the absorption of nutrients. So, for many foods, cooking can boost nutrients, and improve taste and texture, which could encourage people to end up eating more healthy foods.”

How much is enough?

Dietitian Margaret Hays says it is recommended to eat two serves of fruit and five serves of vegetables each day. One serve of vegetables is one cup of leafy greens or half a cup of firm, hard vegetables.