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7 Fruits and Veggies a Day? Easy Ways to Sneak Them In

If you thought fitting in five fruits and veggies a day was tough, hold onto your fruit bowl: New research from the University College London suggests that we need at least seven servings of fruits and vegetables a day for optimal health. Holy zucchini! That's a lot of produce.

But what a payoff! In the study, published in March, people who ate at least seven portions of produce a day had a 42 percent lower risk of death from all causes. Specifically, they had a 31 percent lower risk of death from heart disease and stroke and a 25 percent lower risk of death from cancer. The study authors called the results "staggering."

It may sound impossible, but these simple tricks will help you squeeze in your super seven without your having to eat like a rabbit. We promise! Here's how:

Do Smart Swaps

Look for opportunities within your current diet. Which food groups do you consume a lot of each day? You may be drawing a blank, but think harder: Most of us take in seven servings of grains or more without even realizing it. One serving is just a half cup of cooked pasta or a half cup of cereal. And that heaping bowl of corn flakes you had at breakfast or that giant plate of pasta at dinner could easily be four or more servings alone!

So make a switch: Instead of a large bowl of pasta, fill half your bowl with pasta and the other half with steamed or roasted vegetables. At breakfast, fill your bowl halfway with cereal and then top it off with fresh berries. Just like that, you've added one to three servings of produce a day.

Mix Them In

Do you eat eggs in the morning? Don't eat them alone. Try mixing in a half cup of sautéed spinach for a delicious omelet that gives you a full serving of vegetables before 9 a.m. Are you making burgers to toss on the grill? Chop up fresh onions and mushrooms and mix them with the meat before cooking to boost your veggie intake while lowering the saturated fat and calorie content of your burgers.

Sweet Satisfaction

How do you satisfy your sweet tooth? Don't overlook the power of fruit to curb cravings. If you're jonesing for a treat, swap your candy for fresh fruit -- strawberries, blueberries, melon, mango, apples, pineapple, oranges, pears, peaches, nectarines -- or no-sugar-added dried fruit like raisins or cranberries. You can even dip them in dark chocolate to amp up the deliciousness. Fruit provides only 100 calories, but is packed with fiber and antioxidants.

Drink Them Up!



READ MORE AT THE JUICE BAR

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Drink Them Up!

Although drinking tall glasses of fruit juice can pack on the calories, having one small glass (1/2 cup equals one serving of fruit) of 100 percent juice daily is a great way to boost your fruit and antioxidant intake. Try mixing a half cup of juice -- orange, grapefruit, apple, unsweetened cranberry or some combination thereof -- with 1 cup of cold water or seltzer for a refreshing beverage.



Blend Them Up

When you think of smoothies, you probably think fruit -- berries, banana, maybe some mango. But did you know that vegetables practically disappear into smoothies? The next time you pull out your blender to make a smoothie, add a half-cup of greens -- fresh spinach, kale or swiss chard leaves, cucumber or celery, or go orange with pumpkin, carrots, butternut squash and even beets. The taste won't change and you'll have fit in another veggie serving -- bam!

Have a Crunchy Snack

If you hanker for a salty snack like chips in the afternoon, here's a sneaky swap that still satisfies your salt craving while cramming in yet one more nutritious serving of vegetable. Try kale chips or carrot chips -- and yes, they are delicious! Simply place thinly-sliced carrots or kale leaves that have been washed and dried on a baking sheet, drizzle with olive oil, and sprinkle on a dash of sea salt. Bake at 350° F for 10-15 minutes, or until crispy, and enjoy!

Your Nine-a-day Meal Plan

Think it can't be done? Think again! Here is a simple to follow meal plan that provides nine servings of fruits and vegetables -- the last two are just a bonus!

Breakfast: 2 egg omelet made with 1/4 cup sautéed spinach and 1/4 cup sautéed onions served with 1 slice whole grain toast topped with 2 tsp. natural peanut butter and 1/2 cup 100% orange juice

(1 vegetables, 1 fruit)

Snack: 1 cup low-fat cottage cheese topped with 3/4 cup frozen blueberries

(1 fruit)

Lunch: Turkey wrap (made with 12-inch 100% whole grain tortilla, 3 oz. lean turkey breast, 2 Tbsp. shredded carrots, 1/2 cup diced tomatoes, and 1 handful of fresh spinach leaves, 2 Tbsp. hummus) served with one medium (2-inch diameter) Red Delicious apple

(1-2 vegetables, 1 fruit)

Snack: Trail Mix made with 1/2 cup 100% whole grain cereal, 2 Tbsp. raisins, 1 Tbsp. chopped walnuts

(1 fruit)

Dinner: 4 oz. grilled salmon filet, 3 oz. baked yam, 1/2 cup steamed broccoli florets (from frozen or fresh), 1 cup garden salad made with fresh spinach leaves, red peppers, and onions topped with 2 Tbsp. vinaigrette dressing

(3 vegetables)

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