

# Color Me Healthy: Enjoying Fruits and Vegetables

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Who would have guessed when great-grandma set her menu by the foods' colors that she was so right in helping to ensure her family's health and well being?

## Why Care about Colors?

The color molecules that form the more than 2,000 pigments in plant foods not only look scrumptious but also contain strong antioxidants, the health-promoting substances that neutralize the free radicals formed when cells burn oxygen for energy. Free radicals damage or destroy healthy cells. In general, the deeper the color of a fruit or vegetable, the more powerful its antioxidant action.

Plant pigments are a subset of the naturally occurring antioxidants in vegetables and fruits. Other phytochemicals ("phyto," pronounced fight-o, means plant) besides antioxidants help protect against the damaging effects of toxic substances. Eating a variety of fruits and vegetables allows their different phytonutrients to work together to help fight illnesses.

Functional foods or nutraceuticals are foods that provide health benefits beyond basic nutrition, such as helping to prevent disease. Fruits and vegetables are nature's

original functional foods. Taking dietary extracts or supplements is not the same; research to date has shown they do not substitute for eating fruits and vegetables.

## Colors' Health Claims

Fruits and vegetables provide a wide spectrum of healthful qualities, including vitamins and minerals. They are low in calories and sodium, high in water content and contain no cholesterol. Many are good sources of dietary fiber, which helps satisfy hunger and enhances bowel health. Most contain very little fat, and fruit has natural sweetness.

Consuming different colors of fruits and vegetables each day offers satisfying tastes and textures while increasing protection against disease. A diet rich in natural plant pigments protects against heart disease and cancer, slows the aging process, and strengthens mental capacity and the immune system. It also helps decrease the risk of high blood pressure, lung or pulmonary disease such as asthma, stroke, cataracts, age-related macular degeneration, constipation, urinary tract infections, diverticulosis, diabetes, obesity and wrinkling of the skin.

Fruits and vegetables offer an appetizing rainbow of colors. Since