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Making the Most of Eating Green Food

Eating green is easier and tastier than you may think.

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WebMD Feature

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With St. Paddy's Day upon us, it's time to think green. Researchers credit green veggies with promoting colon and heart health, as well as providing folic acid to pregnant women to prevent birth defects. And guess what? Greens in the kale family also contain as much calcium as milk. And they help balance all the sodium in our diets with healthy potassium.

Leafy green vegetables and fruits are loaded with antioxidants, minerals, folate, and flavonoids. These all work to prevent unstable molecules called free radicals from damaging cells.

Melissa Diane Smith, nutritionist and author of *Going Against the Grain: How Reducing and Avoiding Grains Can Revitalize Your Health*, tells WebMD that most Americans don't even come close to the recent revised dietary recommendations of eating five to nine servings of fruits and vegetables a day. "Eat vegetables in place of grains," she urges.

Even salad-phobes can easily get more green in their diets.

Tips for Greening Up Your Plate

Unfortunately, eating vegetables is not an automatic choice for humans. Therefore, it's a challenge to present green foods in enough different ways to titillate the jaded palate. Some ideas:

- Wrap small portions of cheese, meats, rice, or condiments in greens. Even restaurants are now offering "lettuce wraps." "Blanched cabbage (boiled a few minutes in water or tomato juice to soften it) is also a good wrap," Audrey T. Cross, PhD, a nutritionist at Columbia University in New York City, tells WebMD.
- Speaking of cabbage, a cooked hunk sauced with a little mayonnaise is delicious, according to Cross. Cabbage is rich in anticancer antioxidants and bioflavonoids.
- Dress up frozen pizza with frozen or fresh spinach or green pepper. When you order out, ask for double green pepper. Green pepper is packed with vitamin C, Smith notes. Spinach (and Swiss chard and kale) is especially good because it contains lutein, a complex substance that can help prevent the blinding eye disorder called macular degeneration. Lutein also lowers cholesterol.
- Steam veggies to keep them green. If you don't have a fancy steamer, a few minutes suspended in a colander over a pot of water works.

- For leafy greens, steaming can result in a gray mess. Acids in these greens destroy the chlorophyll, leaving an unappetizing wad. Instead, treat spicy greens like mustard greens or chard by precooking in 2 cups of water per pound for three to 10 minutes.
- Drink the water afterwards. It's surprisingly tasty.
- Some greens are bitter -- try adding raisins.
- Sneak cut-up zucchini into meatloaf. The same goes for pasta sauce; load it up with greenery.
- If you make canned soup, toss in frozen peas or string beans. The FDA has declared that frozen is as nutritious as fresh. A box of veggies in macaroni and cheese is also delicious.
- At the salad bar, make a veggie sandwich. Add balsamic vinegar and munch away!
- Check out the prewashed department. In addition to prewashed lettuce, mesclun, field greens, and other variations (the darker the green, the better), grocery stores now carry prewashed broccoli florets and cut-up celery. Who says crudites are just for parties? Toss some ranch dressing in your lunch box, along with prewashed veggie chunks, and it's a perfect desk nibble!
- Don't forget the fresh herbs next door to the prewashed greens. Make pesto (mashed olive oil, garlic, and basil leaves) and spread on crusty bread and pop under the broiler.
- Or toss some fresh tarragon on asparagus, drizzle with extra virgin olive oil, and roast at 400 degrees for 15 minutes. Now this does beat canned!
- When you finish eating, banish that garlic mouth by eating your parsley garnish. According to Smith, parsley is surprisingly full of nutrients.

Some Real Green Giants

Some Real Green Giants

Sometimes we overlook some good sources of green power.

Edamame are soybeans harvested while young and still in their pods. They can be found in the produce section or a salted form as a snack food. Soy is great at destroying free radicals and has been shown in some studies to lower the risk of breast cancer and lower cholesterol. Soy can even contribute to bone strength and help prevent osteoporosis. Carol A. Miles, PhD, agricultural systems specialist at the Washington State University Vancouver Research Station, tells WebMD that she thinks of edamame as a protein source. "No cholesterol!" she adds. She boils the fresh pods for three minutes; butter and salt are optional. Miles says she doesn't even add them.

Green olives have been cultivated since prehistoric times and are healing not only to nations (olive branch) but to innards. The pale green oil does not clog arteries and is credited with

helping prevent some cancers. It is even singled out as beneficial in the government's new dietary guidelines (www.usda.gov)(www.usda.gov). Cross recommends using olives themselves in salads, spaghetti sauce, ratatouille, stews, and almost any savory dish.

Mint is for both sweet and savory concoctions and is available fresh in most produce sections. It settles the stomach and freshens the breath. Cross recommends using it in salads, brewing it in hot or iced tea, mashing it up in chocolate cake or pudding, or grinding it like a pesto to top roasted meats. "And don't forget the juleps," she winks.

Green tea is getting a lot of good buzz these days. The pale green elixir is loaded with catechins which are credited with reducing rates of cancer, as well as tumors. Green tea may also lower cholesterol and blood sugar and kill viruses. Substitute it for soda at your desk. Cross also recommends making it into a gelatin dessert or ice cream.

The little green Granny Smith apples (yes, there was one, in Australia in 1868), are perfect pie apples, look fabulous in a coat of caramel, and can be baked with brown sugar and cinnamon and topped with ice cream. According to Smith (no relation), apples contain pectin and fiber, which slow the release of blood sugar and keep energy levels high (and the doctor away). Cross recommends grating Granny Smiths into muffins and pancakes, or dipping them in peanut butter. "Their lemony taste is great with peanut butter," she says.

The parade of greenery is endless. Even green beer contains B vitamins and no cholesterol.

No recipe for shamrocks, though. Maybe with a nice vinaigrette?

Star Lawrence is a medical journalist based in the Phoenix area.

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SOURCES: Melissa Diane Smith, nutritionist; and author, *Going Against the Grain: How Reducing and Avoiding Grains Can Revitalize Your Health*. Audrey T. Cross, PhD, nutritionist, Columbia University, New York City. Carol A. Miles, PhD, agricultural systems specialist, Washington State University Vancouver Research Station, Vancouver, Wash.

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