

Parents can learn to raise vegetable lovers

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Teaching children that vegetables are tasty as well as good for them can be a true parenting challenge. But by following a few simple tips, parents can increase the chances that their kids develop a taste for healthy, nutritious veggies, according to a Penn State nutritionist.

"Many people -- adults and children -- are falling short when it comes to eating the recommended daily number of servings of vegetables," said Mandel Smith, Penn State Cooperative Extension foods and nutrition educator. "Depending on their energy needs, school-age children need as many as 1.5 cups of vegetables each day. A reasonable serving size of vegetables for children 1 to 6 years old is one tablespoon for each year of life."

Smith pointed out that there are many health benefits linked to eating a variety of vegetables every day. "Vegetables add fiber, vitamins, antioxidants and phytochemicals to our diets," she said. "Antioxidants found in vegetables -- such as beta-carotene, vitamin C and vitamin E -- protect our body cells from damage, help keep the immune system healthy and help reduce the risk of cancer, heart disease, diabetes and stroke."

Phytochemicals in vegetables also play a role in keeping our bodies healthy, according to Smith. "Phytochemicals are plant sources of disease-fighting chemicals; they are not vitamins or minerals," she explained. "There are hundreds of phytochemicals, each having a slightly different role. It is important to eat a variety of vegetables every day to get the right amount of phytochemicals."

So what can parents do to break down the barriers between their children and healthy vegetables? Smith offers the following tips:

-- Be patient. Smith said it may take several attempts before a child will accept a particular vegetable. "Sometimes a child may have to try a vegetable eight to 10 times before he says he likes it," she said. "Try not to make a big deal about a child eating a food. Make it available, and let the child decide how much to eat."

-- Use hunger to your advantage. Smith advises parents to introduce a new food when a child is hungry, increasing the chances that he or she will be willing to try it.

-- Don't overcook. "Overcooking causes any vegetable to lose texture, color, flavor and some valuable nutrients," she said.

-- Make veggie snacks easy. Have a supply of vegetables ready to eat and easy to get to in the refrigerator. "Cut up carrots, celery, broccoli, cauliflower and even squash to make a quick and tasty snack when paired with a dip of low-fat salad dressing," Smith said.

-- Be a role model. Children need to see their parents eating vegetables. "You can help your child make healthy food choices by modeling healthy eating," Smith explained. "Serve and eat a variety of vegetables."

-- Be creative. Smith recommends hiding vegetables in other foods that your children enjoy as a way to increase the amount of vegetables they eat in a day. "Chopped vegetables can be added to sloppy-joe sandwich filling, pizza, spaghetti sauce, quick breads and even cookies," she said.

Source: Penn State

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