

Meal kits are booming, but how do they stack up nutritionally?

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Credit: Andrea Piacquadio from Pexels

Meal kits are a [billion dollar industry](#) selling the promise of convenience while cooking healthy meals at home. Delivering ingredients and step-by-

step recipes to the doorstep, meal kits reduce the time and energy to plan, shop and prepare meals. But do they deliver on their promise of health?

While people may [think](#) meal kits are healthy, [our new research](#) suggests this varies.

The range and quantity of vegetables in a meal is a great indicator of how healthy it is. So we assessed the [vegetable content](#) of recipes from six Australian meal kit providers. We found when it comes to nutrition, whether it be budget friendly or high-end, it's more about the meals you choose and less about what company to use.

What we found

For our [new research](#) we purchased a one-week subscription to nine Australian-based meal kit companies to access weekly recipes. Six companies provided their full week of recipes. The [vegetable](#) content of these recipes were analyzed.

Of the 179 meals analyzed, we found recipes use a median of three different types of vegetables and provide a median of 2.5 serves of vegetables per person. At first glance, this looks promising. But on closer inspection, the number and types of vegetables vary a lot.

Some recipes provide less than one serve and others more than seven serves of vegetables per person. Not surprisingly, vegetarian recipes provide more vegetables, but almost one-third of these still include less than two vegetables serves per person.

The variety of vegetables included also varies, with recipes providing between one and six different types of vegetables per meal.

What's for dinner?

[Dinner](#) is the time when we're most likely to eat vegetables, so low levels of vegetables in meal kit meals matter.

Eating vegetables is known to [reduce the risk](#) of type 2 diabetes, heart disease, [obesity](#) and some cancers. What's more, food preferences and eating habits are [learned](#) in childhood. So being exposed to a wide range of vegetables from a young age is important for future health.

But few Australians eat enough vegetables. According to the [Australian Dietary Guidelines](#), children should be eating 2.5 to five serves and adults at least five serves of vegetables each day. Currently children eat an average of [less than](#) two serves and adults less than three serves of vegetables per day.

So there's room for improvement and meal kits may help.

Meal kits have advantages

The good news is that using meal kits can be a healthier alternative to ordering takeaway delivery or prepared ready-to-heat meals. When we cook at home, we have much more say in what's for dinner. We can use healthier cooking methods (think grilled rather than deep-fried), healthier fats (olive or canola oil) and add in plenty of extra veg. All make for better nutrition and better health.

Meal kits might also build your cooking confidence to cook more "from scratch" and to learn about new ingredients, flavor combinations and time-saving techniques. Cooking with meal kits may even cut household food waste by providing the exact amount of ingredients needed to prepare a meal.

Five tips for getting the most out of meal kits

1. Select some vegetarian options

This way you can have [meat-free](#) dinners during the week. Vegetarian recipes are more likely to help you meet daily vegetable intakes and to eat a wider variety of vegetables

2. Choose recipes with at least three different types of vegetables

Eating a range of vegetable types and colors will help maximize nutritional benefits. [Research](#) shows eating a variety of vegetables at dinner can increase our vegetable intakes. Exposing children to "eating the rainbow" can also increase their willingness to eat vegetables

3. Choose recipes with unfamiliar or new vegetables

Research tells us that learning to prepare and cook vegetables can increase cooking [confidence](#) and skills. This can influence our willingness to buy a wider range of vegetables. Worried about fussy eaters? Add your child's favorite cooked or raw veg to their plate (one familiar, one new).

4. Look for ways to add more vegetables

It's OK to tweak the [recipe](#)! Adding vegetables from your fridge—maybe some lettuce on the side or chopped up carrots to a cooked sauce—to meal kit meals will help reduce household [food waste](#). You can also extend meals by adding a can of lentils or beans to mince-based meals, or frozen peas or chickpeas to a curry. This adds valuable fiber to the meal and also bulks up these recipes, giving you leftovers for

the next day

5. Use less

While vegetables are important for health, it's also important to consider the [salt](#), [fat and energy](#) content of meal kit recipes. When using meal kits, you can [use less](#) seasoning, spice mix or stock cubes and add more herbs instead.

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