

- Cooking—vegetables

Ways to Make Eating Veggies More Interesting

There's no need to tell you again to eat more vegetables – there's only about, oh, a few hundred health reasons to do so.

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But unfortunately, some of the very chemicals that make vegetables so healthy are the same ones that cause many of us (and not just five-year-olds) to shudder at the sight of steamed greens. In fact, so many people are extra-sensitive to the bitter taste of the chemicals in vegetables – food experts call these people supertasters.

For others, it isn't the taste but the lack thereof that makes them turn up their noses at vegetables. Many veggies pack a lot less flavor than they could, points out Tristan Millar, former director of marketing and business development for Frieda's, the specialty produce marketer in Los Angeles, USA. "American growers have focused on varieties that ship well and spoil slowly, and there's been so little emphasis on taste."

But with a little extra know-how at the grocery store or in front of the stove, you can rekindle your love affair with this essential food group. Here are 14 ideas to eat more vegetables and improve your health, starting with dinner tonight.

1. Buy the babies. In some vegetables, flavors intensify as the plant matures, which is why the so-called baby versions have wider taste appeal with just as many health benefits. Experiment with baby artichokes, turnips, squashes, and carrots (the ones sold in bunches, with greens still attached – not those sold in plastic bags, which are simply regular carrots, trimmed down). You can find the babies at larger supermarkets, specialty grocers, and farmers' markets; some, such as younger Brussels sprouts, can even be bought frozen. Not only do many people find baby vegetables more flavorful and less bitter, but they prefer the texture too: Younger vegetables are more tender and require less cooking.
2. Oil it up. Years of fat phobia have conditioned us to shun oils whenever possible. But judiciously using fats – especially heart-healthy ones like olive oil – can go far in helping you love your veggies. When fat binds with seasonings and spices, it can transform vegetables from a duty-diet item to something downright yummy. And the link between vegetable avoidance and certain cancers is strong enough to justify the extra calories if it gets you closer to your recommended five to nine servings of fruits and vegetables each day. Try it: Drizzle olive oil, salt, and pepper on a baking sheet of broccoli and bake in the oven at around 375° F about 40 minutes – it's delicious!
3. Use dip. Raw veggies probably aren't the first thing you crave when a snack attack strikes, but you'll be much more tempted to eat them when they're dunked in hummus, low-fat dip, or your favorite salad dressing. Try munching at work or even in front of the TV – sometimes, taking veggies away from the dinner table makes eating them feel like less of a health chore.

4. Say cheese. Moderate amounts of cheese sauce – not 1950s-style smothering – can make broccoli or cauliflower rich and satisfying. Or toss in bits of your favorite cheeses (including a little cream cheese or feta) with green beans, spinach, or kale.
5. Start blanching. Ever wonder why the Chinese tend to consume so many more vegetables, including the strongtasting crucifers such as broccoli? While it's true that Asians are less likely than Caucasians to have an extreme sensitivity to bitterness, the real secret is blanching, a technique common among Asian cooks. Steam vegetables for 30 to 60 seconds, then remove them from the heat and drop them in cold water. "That stops the strong flavors from developing," Klein says. Stir-frying also preserves flavor by cooking quickly.
6. Cook Brussels sprouts faster... If you normally find that sprouts taste too strong, turn them into a delicacy: Slice diagonally, and separate into rings. Microwave with a little water, butter, and plenty of caraway seeds just until done.
7. ... And onions slower. The onion family, which includes leeks, shallots, and garlic, is rich in compounds believed to fight cancer, says a nutritionist. But for onion haters, the sharp flavors and strong smells can be almost nauseating. Try slow-roasting onions, which brings out the sweetness and cuts the sharpness. Brush leeks or sliced onions with a little olive oil, wrap in foil packets, and toss on the grill to take the sting out.
8. Buy tomatoes ripe. Although tomatoes rival potatoes as favorite vegetable of many people, others say these taste funny, feel pulpy in their mouth, or are too bland. The secret is making sure you buy those that are vine ripened, which eliminates almost all the bitter flavors, says a molecular biologist. Ask for them in season at farmers' markets, and at better and specialty grocers.
9. Store produce away from fruit. Parsnips, which have a strong flavor to start with, can become bitter when stored near apples and other fruits, which produce ethylene gas, according to research from Pennsylvania State University. The flavor of carrots, squash, and some herbs will also suffer in the presence of fruit, while crucifers such as broccoli, Brussels sprouts, and cabbage may turn limp and yellow more quickly. The best way to store parsnips is in a closed paper bag, with ethylene producers (which also include apricots, avocados, peaches, cantaloupes, peppers, and tomatoes) in a separate crisper from ethylene-vulnerable produce.
10. Avoid bitter eggplants. Everyone knows that too-mature eggplants are bitter, but the size of this fiber- and potassium-packed vegetable isn't your best clue: If your thumb leaves an indent that doesn't bounce back, the eggplant will be spongy, tough, and bad tasting, even if it's a little one. To further improve taste, check out its "belly button": At the blossom end, eggplants have either an oval or round dimple. Buy only the ovals – the round ones tend to have more seeds and less "meat." To reduce eggplant's bitter tendencies even more, after you slice it, sprinkle it with salt, then wait a half-hour, rinse, and proceed with your recipe. The salt draws out water, which contains the bitter-tasting compounds. Eggplants are worth the trouble: The insides of these veggies are high in cancer-fighting polyphenols – the same chemicals that make apples so good for the health.

11. Shop at the farmers' market. The flavor in cruciferous veggies, like broccoli, cauliflower, Brussels sprouts, kale, and cabbage, intensifies the longer they're on the shelf, particularly if they're wrapped. Fresh tastes that much better," says a broccoli breeder. Look for broccoli that's sold in bunches, rather than shrink-wrapped to styrofoam.
12. Sneak them in. If you don't like the taste of many vegetables, soup may be your best solution: Most soups cook for so long that the vegetable flavors mellow and weaken, while the seasonings become more pronounced. You can also sneak grated carrots or zucchini into muffins and breads – and even meat loaf.
Next time you make a meat loaf, after you add your usual one cup of bread crumbs and an egg, throw in one cup of grated vegetables: Onions, zucchini, mushrooms, or even green beans will be virtually undetectable, even to you. While the longer baking time breaks down some nutritive value, minerals and vitamins stay in the casserole, and veggies make for a moister meat loaf.
13. Brush up on their health perks. A study found that understanding why something that tastes foul is good for you – combined with repeated, regular exposure to that particular food – actually makes it easier for you to stomach it. If you knew that kale could help protect you from cancer, you might be more willing to forget the taste and eat more of it, particularly if cancer runs in your family and is a concern for you, says researcher.
14. Cave into your sweet tooth. All babies are born with a natural aversion to bitter foods and a preference for sweets. While this fades over time, many people still maintain a penchant for sweet-tasting food. Scientists have long speculated that it's because so many poisonous plants are bitter. So indulge in sweeter vegetables – yams, squash, peas, and carrots – which still pack plenty of nutritional advantages. (www.