Splash some color on your plate! It’s National Nutrition Month and the theme is "Eat Right with Color." Make healthy choices by incorporating a colorful variety of fruits, vegetables, dairy, whole grains, and lean proteins into your meals every day.

You are probably familiar with the adage to eat five a day (three vegetables and two fruits), but the latest research says that number needs to be increased. The diet and lifestyles of more than 300,000 people across eight countries in Europe found that people who ate at least eight portions of fruits and vegetables a day had a 22% lower risk of dying from heart disease than those who ate three portions a day.

In Alaska, we don’t eat enough fruits and vegetables. When surveyed on their consumption only 27% of Alaskans get three servings of vegetables and 30% get two servings of vegetables.

If we aren't getting five a day, how could we possibly get eight portions a day? Here are some ideas to increase your number of servings.

Make it easy. If veggies are in your fridge and ready-to-eat, you will eat them. Take the time to cut up enough fresh vegetables for several days’ worth of cooking and snacking, and then keep them at eye level in the fridge. When you open the refrigerator to grab something that is higher calorie and lower nutrition, they will be handy to tempt you. If you don’t have time, buy a bag of baby carrots, they are already prepared.

Make your next wrap a big lettuce leaf. Instead of using a tortilla, put your fixings on a lettuce leaf and roll it up. We often use lettuce leaves with kids—particularly with a smear of peanut butter and a few raisins. It’s a great snack and low calorie to boot.
Keep it handy. Leave fruits out in a bowl where they will be easily accessible and noticed. When fruits are stored in the refrigerator it can be easy to forget about them. If they are stored out in the open, you may be more likely to reach for fruit instead of something unhealthy when you need a snack.

Use up fruits and vegetables in smoothies. This is especially helpful in using up produce that is overly ripe and about to go bad. Smoothies are also an easy way to increase your intake of fruits and vegetables because they taste good and don't require much preparation. You might be surprised how good spinach or kale tastes in a smoothie.

Use low-fat dips, spreads and melts. A good tasting dip will mask the taste of those vegetables you aren't fond of. Veggies such as cauliflower, green beans, carrots and celery taste great with low- or nonfat ranch dip, salsa, or even a little bit of peanut butter. Hummus is made from chickpeas, so eating it with carrots and other fresh vegetables will give you a double dose of vegetables. And hummus is easy to make at home. Drain a can of chickpeas (garbanzo beans) and blend or process with 2 tablespoons tahini (ground sesame seeds), 2 cloves of garlic, \( \frac{1}{2} \) teaspoon salt, 2 tablespoons olive oil, and 3 tablespoons of lemon juice.

Does only fresh count? Fresh, frozen or canned, it doesn't matter, all are loaded with nutrition. Stock up on frozen or canned. They don't need preparation, you never have to wash them or cut them, and they last for months (frozen) or even years (canned).

Toppings count. If you aren't a vegetable fan, at least add lots of onions, lettuce, and tomatoes to sandwiches and burgers. Hide them in something else. Puree carrots or squash and add them to spaghetti sauce or in your favorite meat loaf. Fruit purees are great in muffins or other baked goods. Replace half the fat with applesauce, mashed plums or bananas.

Research shows that children increase their vegetable consumption if they are offered a reward, in the case of this research, a sticker. Think of how you can reward yourself to increase your vegetable and fruit consumption. Set a goal—such as eating a veggie with every meal most days of the week for one month—and if you succeed, reward yourself.

A better diet is accomplished with small, easy steps instead of completely overhauling the way you eat all at one time.

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