

News Release

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Another Reason to Eat Your Vegetables

Your mother always told you to eat your vegetables because they are good for you. And then there is the old saying that carrots are good for your eyes. Does research back up these claims?

"Absolutely," says Sherry Tanumihardjo, University of Wisconsin-Madison/Extension nutrition specialist. "For example, recent research suggests that eating more fruits and vegetables will reduce your risk of cataracts."

"Because we eat whole foods that contain a variety of nutrients, rather than single nutrients," says Tanumihardjo, "the total amount of fruits and vegetables we eat may have an additive effect in reducing the risk of cataracts."

Cataracts are very common in older people and it has been estimated that by age 80, more than half of all Americans either have a cataract or have had cataract surgery. A cataract is the clouding of the lens in the eye, affecting vision. It is thought that cataracts develop more rapidly when a person is exposed to prolonged oxidative stress, such as sunlight or smoking. Cataracts remain the leading cause of visual disability in the United States.

A recent study looked at the relationship of fruit and vegetable intake in 35,000 female health professionals and the development of cataracts over a ten-year period. Women were grouped into five categories according to fruit and vegetable intake with the highest averaging around four fruits and seven vegetables per day and the lowest averaging less than one fruit and 1-1/2 vegetables per day. Researchers concluded that the group of people who ate the most fruits and vegetables had a 10 to 15 percent reduction in risk for cataracts, compared with the other four groups. The authors concluded that eating more than 3.4 servings (about two cups) of fruits and vegetables per day reduced the risk of cataracts. While this is a modest risk reduction, it adds to the health benefits of eating more fruits and vegetables.

How can fruits and vegetables prevent the onset of cataracts? It may be because of their unique combination of antioxidants, micronutrients and other phytochemicals, Tanumihardjo says. Green leafy vegetables are a good source of carotenoids, lutein and zeaxanthin, all of which are known antioxidants. These compounds are found in the macular region at the back of the eye and the lens in the front of the eye.

"There is good reason to believe that by eating the recommended amounts of fruits and vegetables, the onset of eye disease may be prevented, says Tanumihardjo. "Because lutein and zeaxanthin are concentrated in the eye, there is good biological reason to believe those with a diet high in fruit and vegetables have less risk of developing cataracts."

The 2005 USDA Dietary Guidelines for Americans recommend eating two cups of fruit and two cups of vegetables each day for a 2000-calorie diet. Tanumihardjo recommends selecting a variety of vegetables from the different subgroups (dark green, orange, legumes, starchy vegetables, and other vegetables) several times a week. Variety ensures that you will receive different disease fighting compounds from fruits and vegetables.

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