

ONE SMALL STEP

EAT THE RAINBOW



Colourful foods aren't just a pretty addition to your plate – they provide a brilliant array of helpful nutrients, too

Words Anita Bean

Most of us are aware that we should eat at least five portions of fruit and vegetables every day. But did you know that enjoying a diverse range is just as important? According to a landmark study, published in 2018, eating at least 30 different plants each week can significantly improve our microbiome – the trillions of bacteria and other microorganisms that live in our gastrointestinal tract. Because gut health is intricately connected to many other areas of human health too, this means that including a wide variety of plants in our diet might ultimately protect us against a whole multitude of diseases.

“Eating a range of ingredients provides the orchestra of nutrition that we need to thrive,” says Dr Rupy Aujla, NHS GP and creator of The Doctor’s Kitchen app. “Diversifying what you eat on a weekly basis is one of the best health strategies I could recommend. Getting different fruit and vegetables into your diet feeds your gut microbes and improves their activity, which will lead to better absorption of nutrients from food, as well as helping the microbes perform their important functions.”

So where does colour come into it? Simply put, eating plant-based foods in a rainbow of colours is the easiest way to guarantee you’re getting a great mix of nutrients. “The wider the variety, the more likely it is that our diet will be nutritionally complete,” explains registered dietitian Ro Huntriss.

Some of these helpful nutrients are ‘phytochemicals’. Plants produce these to help protect themselves – for example, by making the plant look unattractive to insect pests. Unlike vitamins and minerals, phytochemicals are not essential to health, but some studies have shown that their consumption may be linked with a lower risk of certain diseases. (Though, as always, more research is needed.)

One very important group of phytochemicals is polyphenols; our gut microbes help transform these into all-important short-chain fatty acids, which are made by the body when fibre is digested. There is also research to suggest that they may be associated with cancer prevention and better heart and mental health.

Free radicals are molecules that occur naturally in our bodies (through exercise and digestion) and can also be absorbed from environmental sources such as pollution and sunlight. Over time, they can cause oxidative

FLYING COLOURS

Simple ways to brighten up your plate



CHANGE IT UP

Instead of cooking one vegetable side, up it to two, three or more to get more colours on your plate. Many can be cooked in the same pan together, so you’re not creating extra cooking or washing up.



GET SAUCY

Use colourful vegetables to make base sauces – and think beyond tomatoes! Sweet red peppers make a delicious romesco sauce to accompany lamb or roasted veg, or blend wilted kale or spinach with herbs, nuts and hard cheese into a pesto.



LICENCE TO GRILL

When you’re planning a barbecue, don’t just focus on meat. Sweetcorn, lettuce, peppers and asparagus are all wonderful when charred on the grill, while beetroot and aubergine are transformed when wrapped in foil and slowly cooked in the embers.

stress, cell damage and inflammation – which has been associated with conditions such as rheumatoid arthritis, dementia, cardiovascular disease, stroke and type 2 diabetes. The good news is most phytochemicals act as antioxidants – which may help protect cells from being damaged by these free radicals.

Different ‘colours’ of food tend to offer different phytonutrients. Red foods, such as tomatoes and watermelon, for example, are rich in lycopene, an antioxidant that has been shown to lower the risk of certain cancers as well as cardiovascular disease. Purple and blue foods, including blueberries, blackberries, blackcurrants and cherries contain anthocyanins, a group of antioxidants which have been linked to lowering the risk of cardiovascular disease and type 2 diabetes. The green colour of many favourite vegetables, such as broccoli, cabbage and spinach, indicates they provide sulforaphane and glucosinolates, which may have cancer-protective properties. (Large studies have shown an association between consumption of lots of brassica vegetables and reduced cancer risk – but more research is needed). Yellow and orange veg drawer and fruit bowl staples, such as carrots, butternut squash, sweet potatoes, mango, and cantaloupe melon meanwhile, contain beta-carotene (which the body converts into vitamin A, important for maintaining normal skin and immune function) and other carotenoids. And while fruit and vegetables are crucial, don’t forget that the term ‘plants’ means legumes, wholegrains and nuts and seeds, too.

Dr Aujla suggests aiming to include a least three different fruit, vegetables, nuts or seeds in every meal, varying them throughout the week and experimenting with seasonal veg to make the most of the varied health benefits our food has to offer. But what if you find the ‘5 a day’ target challenging enough? Just adding one more per day or mealtime – perhaps berries scattered over your morning cereal, or a handful of spinach wilted into your curry – is a great way to kickstart healthier eating habits. And don’t forget herbs and spices also add colour and flavour.

It’s said that we eat with our eyes and what better way to add interest to meals than by adding a splash of colour? When you fill your plate with all the colours of the rainbow, you’ll not only be consuming more of those valuable nutrients, but adding bright vibrancy and flavour to your day, too. »

ROASTED TOMATO, PEPPER & ROCKET PASTA

This colourful dish is full of antioxidants from the tomatoes and peppers. If you prefer a smooth sauce, blend the roast veg, then toss through the spaghetti and rocket. If you don't have sherry vinegar, red wine or cider vinegar work well too.

Serves 4

Prepare 15 minutes

Cook 30 minutes

- 2 x 250g packs mixed baby tomatoes, destalked
- 200g pack mixed Romano peppers, deseeded and sliced
- 1 large red onion, sliced

- 6 cloves garlic, sliced
- 1½ tbsp nonpareille capers, drained and rinsed
- 50ml sherry vinegar
- ¼ x 15g pack oregano, leaves only
- 2 tbsp olive oil
- 300g wholewheat fusilli
- 4 tbsp pine nuts
- ½ x 90g pack rocket

1 Preheat the oven to 220°C, gas mark 7. In a large roasting tin, toss together the tomatoes, peppers, onion, garlic, capers, sherry vinegar, oregano and olive oil; season. Roast for 25-30 minutes, tossing everything halfway through cooking.

2 When the vegetables have 15 minutes left, bring a large pan of salted water to the boil and cook the pasta for the shortest time on the pack instructions. Spread the pine nuts out on a small baking tray and roast for 3 minutes, until golden. Tip onto a plate and set aside.

3 Use a slotted spoon to transfer the cooked pasta to the vegetable tin, allowing some of the pasta water to travel across too. Tip in the rocket and toss everything together, adding more pasta water if needed. Scatter over the pine nuts and serve.



2 of your 5 a day

Per serving 1784kJ/425kcal/16g fat/1.9g saturated fat/53g carbs/12g sugars/9.4g fibre/11g protein/1g salt/vegan »





FRUIT CORNER

There's so much beautiful British fruit around right now. Blend berries into a breakfast smoothie, or gently stew or roast a mixture of stone fruit to serve with yogurt for a colourful breakfast or dessert. And don't forget that berries can work well in savoury salads, too – especially with salty cheeses.

RAINBOW BANANA SPLIT

This refreshing take on the retro pud replaces whipped cream with kefir frozen yogurt, and is drizzled with a berry compote rather than chocolate sauce. But we promise there's no compromise on flavour!

Serves 4

Prepare 5 minutes

Cook 10 minutes

- 225g pack blueberries
- 150g pack blackberries
- ½ tsp vanilla bean paste
- 1 tbsp lemon juice

- 4 small bananas
- 4 small scoops mango & coconut kefir frozen yogurt (about 100g in total)
- 150g pack raspberries
- 2 tbsp toasted flaked almonds

1 Put the blueberries, blackberries, vanilla and lemon juice into a large pan and bring to the boil. Simmer over a medium heat for 8-10 minutes, stirring every so often, until the fruits have softened but are still holding their shape. Set aside to cool slightly.

2 Peel the bananas and halve lengthways. Divide between plates or bowls, cut-sides up. Top with the frozen yogurt, then drizzle over the compote. Scatter over the raspberries and almonds before serving.



High in fibre

✓ **Per serving** 909kJ/216kcal/4.9g fat/0.8g saturated fat/33g carbs/29g sugars/7.9g fibre/5.3g protein/0.03g salt/gluten free