

DIVERSITY IN VEGETABLES, NOT QUANTITY, IS THE KEY TO GUT HEALTH

MODULE 2 • BALANCED LIFE • WHOLE-PERSON PROGRAM



Scientists, doctors and nutritionists have long recommended a diet high in fruit and vegetables to keep us in good health. However the latest findings from The American Gut Project, suggest that the presence of fruit and vegetables in your diet alone is not enough. To ensure your diet is optimal for gut health, in addition to quantity it is the amount of diversity in fruit and vegetables in your diet that is a key factor.

Diets containing more diversity in vegetables linked with healthier gut bacteria

The study revealed that diets including 30 or more different types of fruit and vegetable each week were correlated with a much higher diversity in gut microbiota when compared with a diet with a more limited variety of plant matter (10 or fewer plant types). A high diversity of gut bacteria is widely considered a sign of a healthy gut microbiome among scientists.

Another important point to note was that this pattern was observed in both meat-eaters and vegans, indicating that presence and diversity was as important or more so as the quantity.

So what does a diet consisting of 30 different plants in a week look like?

First of all I am not familiar with the rationale behind the number '30' – but its significance – having been linked with healthier microbiomes suggests this is a number that we should aim to surpass.

It doesn't sound like such a large number for me as I consider my diet to be quite healthy and varied. I eat more than 20 meals a week so its slightly more than one additional piece of fruit or vegetable each meal. However when reviewed my diet over the last couple of weeks I realize I've been missing this number by quite some way – and it's actually much harder than I'd imagined.

How does my diet compare?

I eat a typical western diet – relatively high in saturated animal fats– but I am also conscious of my health and try to eat more fish, limit my meat consumption – particularly red meat – and I try to include as much as I can in the way of leafy vegetables as I can.

However my typical diet tends to be very repetitive – not in the meals and recipes – but in the ingredients. I cook with the same ingredients a lot – many tomato, onion and garlic based dishes, and a lot of the same fruit, root vegetables and leafy greens week in week out.

So when I added up the variety of plants in my diet I'm falling far short.. only achieving about 20 different plant types / week I may be being slightly hard on myself but it's much harder than I thought. Do grains count? Perhaps. Do pulses and nuts? – Probably. Does bread count? Its processed so perhaps its not wise to.

In my diet the same vegetables keep appearing – onions, garlic, tomatoes, spinach, broccoli, cabbage, cauliflower, aubergine (eggplant), squash, carrots, peas, avocado's, bananas, apples, blueberries, raisins, lettuce, cucumber, celery, pine nuts and walnuts. It sounds good but actually its not that diverse.

After looking into this I then read up on health advice given out by the Japanese government in the 1980's after an influx of American or western foods in the 1970's and 80's lead to rising levels of obesity and cardiovascular disease.

This advice was to consumer 20 different types of food every day. The guidance did not single out plant matter for special attention – although subsequent recommendations were given later on what food types should be present. However the goal was very similar – aim for a lot of diversity in your diet.

Diversity in Processed foods?

Now we have written a lot about the damage that processed foods do to our health – largely pointing the finger of blame at the preservatives, emulsifiers, sugar, salt and other additives, such as flavor enhancers – all of which affect the make up of our gut bacteria for the worse.

However another consideration is the lack of diversity and nutritional value in processed foods – and diets high in processed foods. Aside from preservatives and additives, the common ingredients include various forms of sugars and starch; including corn flour, potatoes, maize and rice these ingredients once processed are little more than another form of sugar. Any the other ingredients – egg and dairy, fruit jams or chocolate are staples in many diets anyway – and once processed provide little or no value.

Considering how our diets have changed its really no surprise that our gut bacteria has too – and that we are now getting so sick. Who is to blame – well some would argue governments should do more to regulate and educate– while others may blame the food industry – or that this is the cost of convenience in our hectic daily lives.

In any case we each need to take ultimate responsibility for our health – and the health of our family – and responsibility for adopting the right diet and lifestyle if we want to restore and protect our health.

So what can we do about this?

There is so much still to understand about our gut microbiota and our health – including what a healthy gut microbiota should look like as this may vary for each of us. However a common sense approach to eating is best.

www.thegoodgut.org/eating-for-gut-health-variety-not-quantity-of-vegetables-is-key