

Daily Union Article
Saturday, June 17
Title: Keep It Fresh and Safe

Are fresh vegetables better for you than canned ones? That is a complex question. The USDA's guidelines for your daily food consumption is that half of what you consume should be fruits and vegetables. The MyPlate guidelines do not discriminate between fresh or packaged produce. Of course, fresh produce means you have control over what has been added during the preparation process. If you get the majority of your fruits and vegetables in some form other than fresh, you need to consider the benefits and drawbacks to the processing and packaging method used.

Canned Products: Canned fruits and vegetables are quick, convenient, and easy to prepare. They have an extended shelf life so you are less likely to have food waste if they are not used soon after their purchase. It is easy to look at the label and know how many servings you have in the package.

Most often, sodium is added to canned foods to both preserve them and "enhance" the flavor. Canned soup is a food that often has excessive amounts of added sodium. Look for labels with phrases such as "low-sodium", "reduced-sodium", or "no-salt-added" to help reduce your intake of sodium.

You also need to look for added sugar, especially in canned fruit. Sugar can take on many different forms as you read the nutrition label. Look for words such as "anhydrous dextrose, corn syrup, lactose, molasses, sucrose, high-fructose corn syrup, maltose, or simply white granulated sugar."

Frozen Products: Typically picked at the peak of ripeness, fruits and vegetable are preserved through a process called flash freezing to preserve optimal nutrition. These products can last several months in the freezer and offer an economical option to buying fruit or vegetables that are out of season. Frozen fruits and vegetables often have a better flavor than canned products have.

You will still need to watch for added sodium in these products. Look at the nutrition label carefully and choose the product with the lowest amount of sodium. If the product has had a sauce or seasoning added to it, you can bet the sodium content is elevated significantly.

Choose fruit with a label that reads "100% fruit" and double check the ingredient list to make sure no other ingredients were added.

Fresh Products: Preparing your produce for consumption soon after you have purchased it will help ensure you get the most nutritional value from it that you can. It will also reduce your food waste and can be very economical when purchased in season. For example, if you purchase locally grown cucumbers at the farmer's market, clean and slice one of them up when you get home. Stashing a snack bag of cucumbers in small soft-sided cooler or insulated backpack when you head for work each day will offer you a fresh snack to consume at your mid-morning break. I like to keep a bowl of fruit in our conference room to have as a healthy snack option for myself and co-workers.

Purchase your fruits and vegetables when they are in season. Not only will they taste better, they will be more economical to purchase. Some of the locally produced fruits and vegetables you will see at our local farmer's market this time of year include red potatoes, early season green beans, onions, and leaf lettuce or spinach. You might still get some fresh strawberries, but we are nearing the end of the season when strawberries produce in abundance.

Regardless of how the fruit or vegetable is processed, you will only get the benefit of these necessary foods if you put them on your plate and consume them. Remember, half of your daily intake should be fruits and vegetables! Making sure you have ample fruits and vegetables in your diet promotes better health and can reduce your risk of certain diseases.

If you are on a tight food budget, here are some ideas to help you make nutritious choices that are cost-savvy:

- 1) Use the food ads from local grocery stores to compare prices, find coupons, and see what they have on sale. Build your grocery list with these ads in hand.
- 2) Bring a list to the store with you. It is entirely too easy to get wooed in to purchasing food you don't need or may not eat because of the effective and enticing displays you see at the store.
- 3) Buy smaller amounts and purchase more frequently. Some fresh fruits and vegetables don't last very long. If you buy in smaller amounts, you can ensure the food is consumed before it spoils.
- 4) Buy your fruits and vegetables in their simplest forms. The more steps that a food goes through to get to your table, the more cost it takes to get it there. Pre-cut, pre-washed, ready-to-eat, and processed foods are convenient, but that convenience comes at a cost to YOU, the consumer!
- 5) Plant your own produce to cut costs. By starting a garden – in the yard or in a pot on your deck – you can have fresh, inexpensive, and flavorful produce at pennies on the dollar compared to the store. Herbs, cucumbers, peppers, or tomatoes are all good options for the beginner gardener. You can contact our office if you have questions about where to put your containers or how to select the best location for a new garden in your yard. Chuck Otte will steer you in the right direction!

Call the Geary County K-State Research and Extension office at 785-238-4161 for more information about produce selection, storage, and preparation. Until next time, keep living resourcefully!