

Variety: Is the Spice of Life Making You Fat?



Q. “I’ve often heard the best way to assure a nutritionally sound diet is to eat a wide variety of foods from all the food groups. Is that true?”

A. Yes and no.

Nutrition experts have long preached the benefits of eating a variety of foods from several different food groups in order to:

- a) Insure an adequate intake of all known and unknown nutrients and potentially beneficial phytochemicals.
- b) Avoid getting excessive amounts of potentially harmful substances found in some foods.

However, there is one downside to increasing the variety of foods consumed at any given meal. Research has shown that the greater the variety of foods offered at a meal, the more calories are consumed. This is particularly true when the foods vary significantly in taste, texture and nutritional composition.

Simply put, all-you-can-eat buffets are not the place to go if you

want to lose weight. Since 2 out of 3 American adults are now overweight or obese, the message for variety needs to be tweaked.

Increase variety of vegetables

The one food group for which increased variety usually means fewer calories consumed and better health attained is the non-starchy vegetables group: tomatoes, carrots, lettuce, onions, spinach, broccoli, etc. The more salads, steamed vegetables and vegetable soups a person eats at a meal and each day, the better. But take care; if you add a fatty salad dressing, cheese, bacon bits and croutons to that salad, research shows you will likely increase the amount of calories consumed at that meal.

Decrease variety of calorie-dense foods

Calorie-dense foods include foods that are high in fat, sugar and/or white flour. Examples include baked goods, desserts, chips, dips, dressings, sauces, candy and fatty processed meats and cheeses. Eating a greater variety of these foods will cause you to consume too many calories.

Variety is a double-edged sword. It is good to eat a variety of unprocessed low-calorie foods up to a point. But eating a variety of high-calorie foods can lead to weight gain.

Consuming fewer calories, along with increasing physical activity, is the way to go for weight control and better health.



Checklist of all the right foods for weight control

Take a look at the list below. These foods are minimally processed and high in fiber and/or low in fat. Eating more of these, along with increasing exercise and physical activity, will help you avoid consuming excess calories:

- vegetables
- fruits
- beans/legumes
- whole-grain pasta
- oatmeal
- barley
- brown rice
- potatoes
- yams
- fruits
- nonfat dairy products
- seafood

These foods tend to fill people up on fewer calories than high-fat and more-refined foods. But beware – one should still not go overboard in terms of the variety of even these healthful food choices consumed at any single meal or snack if weight loss is a goal.