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### NF93-117 Food Guide Pyramid Vegetable Group

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## Food Guide Pyramid *Vegetable Group*

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### Overview

The United States Department of Agriculture's Food Guide Pyramid is a general food guide for individuals aged two and older. The Pyramid's purpose is to encourage Americans to eat a variety of foods from each of the five basic food groups. Each food group provides needed nutrients, and excluding any one group may mean missing important nutrients.

A sixth food group includes fats, oil and sweets. Foods in this group provide energy, but little nutritional value. Most people should use foods from this group sparingly.

This fact sheet provides a closer look at the **Vegetable Group**. The Pyramid recommends eating three to five servings of vegetables each day.

### Fitting Vegetables Into Your Daily Plan

Nationally, Americans eat about twelve servings of vegetables each week. This amount is far less than the recommended number of servings for the same time period.

Green salads, fried potatoes and other potatoes, string beans, peas, corn and tomatoes are favorite vegetables among Americans. In Nebraska, potatoes are eaten most often followed by lettuce, carrots and tomatoes. Nearly two out of three vegetables are eaten fresh in Nebraska.

Many vegetables are seasonal and are eaten less frequently. Seasonal vegetables include broccoli, cauliflower, radishes, spinach and summer squashes such as zucchini. Canned and frozen vegetables allow consumers to have a larger variety of vegetables to choose from throughout the year. The following table provides many examples of different types of vegetables.

Artichokes

Asparagus  
Beans including dry beans  
Beets  
Broccoli  
Brussels Sprouts  
Cabbage  
Carrots  
Cauliflower  
Celery  
Corn  
Cucumbers  
Greens such as collars, mustard, spinach and turnip greens  
Lettuce  
Mushrooms  
Peas & pea pods  
Potatoes and sweet potatoes  
Pumpkins  
Radishes  
Squash, summer or winter  
Tomatoes  
Turnips  
Water Chestnuts

Vegetables are popular with people watching their weight because they are relatively low in calories and fat. However, lack of attention to preparation practices may add extra fat to these foods. For example, fried or buttered vegetables have more calories and fat than plain vegetables. Cheese and cream sauces add fat, and lettuce and green salads have extra fat when you ladle on the salad dressing. Keep calories low by leaving fat off your vegetables.

To gain the most advantage from eating vegetables, don't limit yourself to a few traditional, but instead eat many different types. Dark green vegetables such as spinach, broccoli and different types of lettuce may be eaten fresh and uncooked. Add cooked, dark-green vegetables to casseroles for extra color and texture.

Winter squash, sweet potatoes and carrots are deep yellow vegetables that provide different flavors, textures and color to meals. Starchy vegetables, such as corn, potatoes and peas, provide complex carbohydrates which are an excellent energy source. Pinto, kidney, and Great Northern beans are also a good low-fat source of protein and complex carbohydrates. In the Food Guide Pyramid, dry beans are also listed in the meat group.

### **Why Include Vegetables?**

Vegetables provide many different vitamins and minerals. These low-fat, fiber-rich foods are good sources of vitamin A, vitamin C and folic acid. Magnesium, potassium and iron are found in some vegetables. Food energy from vegetables is likely to be from starch and some simple sugars. Current dietary guidelines recommend that Americans include plenty of vegetables, fruits and grain products in their diet.

About one-third of the vitamin A in our diets comes from fruits and vegetables. Dark-green and yellow vegetables have carotene which converts to vitamin A inside the body. Vitamin A works to provide

healthy skin, hair and mucous membranes. Proper bone growth and tooth development depends on vitamin A. Vitamin A assists with night vision or the ability of the eye to adapt to darkness.

Research indicates a link between carotene and prevention of certain types of cancer. There is room for more investigation on this topic, but this link provides another encouragement for including vegetables in your diet.

Many of the vitamins from vegetables can be lost during preparation, cooking and storage. To retain as much nutritional value as possible, use the following tips:

- Serve raw when possible.
- Keep covered during storage. Most vegetables should also be refrigerated.
- Use cooking techniques that will reduce exposure to water and heat. Steam, bake or microwave vegetables for the shortest time possible. Use as little water as possible when boiling.
- Avoid exposing cut surfaces to the air.

## Vegetables at Different Life Stages

**Infants:** Vegetables can become a part of infant diets after cereals have been introduced, typically when the child is five to seven months old. Mildly-flavored strained vegetables are best to start with. Add a single vegetable at a time for more variety. If the infant dislikes a particular vegetable at first, try it again later. As infants gain more finger control and teeth start to appear, introduce mashed or softened vegetables with more texture. Avoid choking by mashing small, round pieces of vegetables, such as peas and carrot coins, before serving.

**Toddlers and Preschool Children:** By age two, young children should have three to five servings of vegetables daily. The serving size for ages one to six is two tablespoons to 1/3 cup for cooked vegetables.

**School-Aged Children to Adult:** Vegetables should be a regular part of the daily diet at three to five servings each day. A serving of vegetable for older children, adolescents and adults amounts to the following:

Raw, leafy vegetables: 1 cup  
Cooked or chopped raw vegetables: 1/2 cup  
Vegetable juice: 3/4 cup

## Summary

Include vegetables as a part of your meals or snacks throughout the day. Their raw crispness makes them a favorite for snacks and salads. Vegetables are tasteful as an individual menu item or served as part of a food mixture. They add variety in color, texture and flavor, and are rich in nutritional value.

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