

Eat More Good Food: Vegetable and Fruit Edition

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This is the first in a series of several steps that I’ll be writing on how to eat better for health and performance. When applied in order, they’ll build on each other with synergistic results. When taken step by step, it is a less intense, easier path to follow to wellness. Just focus on one at a time, make a goal, and get started.

The first step is “eat more good food”. Now that includes many healthful items. We may have heard a trainer or two spout off “meat and vegetables, nuts and seeds, some fruit, little starch, no sugar.” Okay, now what’s that mean and why is it important? Consider this: there was a time where eating food was our only choice. It was all that was available. Fresh things that grew from the ground, ran, flew, or swam. If we’re not eating “food” now, what *are* we eating? Well, there are thousands of “food-like” products lining the shelves of our grocery stores disguised as food.

There’s an important distinction to make: food has a shelf life! An orange will rot somewhere between one week to one month after it is picked. Meat has a sell by date of a few days. Conversely, Twinkies supposedly can survive nuclear fallout. Cereal bars, chips, and candy are shelf stable for years. I’ll hold off further elaboration for a future post. Just ponder this roughly recalled quote from Coach Glassman of [CrossFit HQ](#), “the longer the shelf life of an item, the further it is away from being a real food”. Nice.

So let’s eat more good food. I’ll break it down piece-by-piece. Let’s go produce-style and start with vegetables and fruits.

Obesity rates have nearly doubled since the 1970’s and 80’s. That’s not new information. However, consider this: “average daily calorie consumption in 2000 was 12 percent, or roughly 300 calories, above the 1985 level. Of that 300-calorie increase, grains (mainly refined grains) accounted for 46 percent; added fats, 24 percent; added sugars, 23 percent; fruits and vegetables, 8 percent; and the meat and dairy groups together, declined by 1 percent.” That’s from the USDA’s Economic Research Service’s [FoodReview; Vol.25](#).

So, we’re eating more calories overall, with a greater proportion coming from snack foods, starch and sugar, and a lesser proportion coming from nutrient rich, and nutrient dense foods. Would you be surprised if I told you that only 20% of children and 32% of adults actually eat their recommended 5 servings of fruits and vegetables per day?

Digging deeper into the rabbit hole, we find that it gets worse. Michael Pollan points out in *In Defense of Food* USDA figures showing declining nutrient content in produce. When compared to the nutrient content of crops in 1950, produce today may contain as much as 20% less Vit C, 15% less Iron, 38% less riboflavin – the list goes on. He makes his point clear when he demonstrates that you would have to eat three apples today to get the same amount of iron as an apple from 1940.

Ames et. al ([1](#), [2](#), [3](#), [4](#)) have found connections between vitamin and mineral deficiencies and increased DNA damage—a pre-cursor to cancer.

It's no wonder that 30% of Americans have a diet deficient in Vit C, E, Magnesium, and many other nutrients. We're eating less of the nutritious foods—and the nutritious foods we DO eat contain less nutrition!

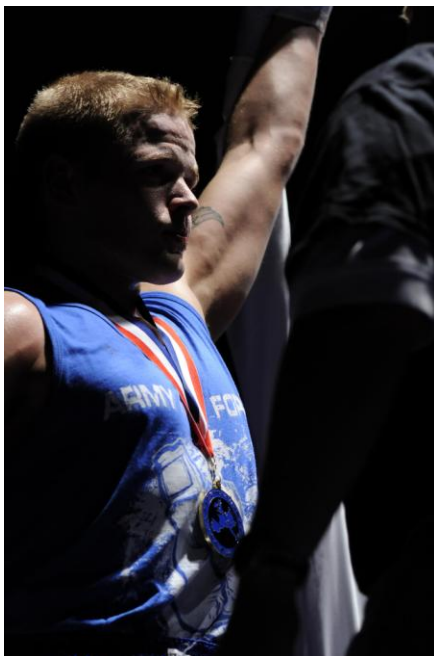
I have much more background data to share on another day. For now, let's wrap up with one last discovery, followed by practical application. A 2001 study by Epstein et al. ([Free Here](#)) found that after one year of intervention, parents who were instructed to eat MORE fruits and vegetables showed a significant decrease in overweight when compared to parents who were instructed to eat LESS high-fat/high-sugar foods. Wow! Eating more of the good stuff was more effective than eating less of the bad stuff. Probably not coincidentally, a benefit of eating more fruits and vegetables was that they actually ended up eating less of the bad stuff as a secondary result. Not surprising as the fiber and water content of fruit and vegetables as well as the low caloric-density likely helped keep the participants full on fewer calories while decreasing the insulin-response curve and cravings for more foods. Fruit may also satisfy that sweet tooth and reduce cravings for less-desirable sweets. Additionally, they contain many phytonutrients and other less-understood compounds that appear to have a strong influence on our health. Plus, they're delicious!

Here are a few quick tips on how to get more fruit and veggies throughout the day. Skip the Poptart or breakfast bar and have a piece of fruit in the morning; it's just as quick and may help to avoid that mid-

Be careful of fruit juice, fruit snacks, fruit cocktail, and other imitations. These have less or no intact fiber, decreased nutrient content and often contain added sugar. When in doubt look at the ingredients label and make sure there's no added sugar or high fructose corn syrup.

morning lull. Next, bring in a fruit bowl to work, put 10 pieces of fruit in it on Monday. Make sure they're gone by Friday. In a pinch, unsweetened, dried fruit is a great item to keep near your desk. Additionally, keep steamer bags of vegetables in the freezer—then you're only a microwave and 5 minutes away from your lunch-time green fix. Snack on cut cucumbers, carrots, snap peas, or celery throughout the day. At restaurants, get a side salad, request extra veggies in place of some of your starch, and/or get fruit as dessert. Be creative and you'll find many more delicious ways to sneak in extra servings. *The [Fruits & Veggies More Matters](#)* campaign site is a

great place to get more ideas. General recommendations are at least 5 per day. I challenge you to go beyond that. Work up to 7-9 or more servings of vegetables and fruit per day and you'll be well on your way to better performance, optimal weight, and improved health!



PJ is the Nutrition Program Manager at the Ramstein Health and Wellness Center and a trainer at [CrossFit Ramstein](#). He's experimented with how the kitchen translates to competition for more than a decade. He holds a degree from Oregon State University's Department of Nutrition and Exercise Science. He is a Registered Dietitian, a CrossFit lvl 1 Certified Trainer, and Certified in Childhood and Adolescent Weight Management.