

## **National Nutrition Month—“Eat Right with Color!”**

*By Janet Hackert, Nutrition Specialist*

March is National Nutrition Month® and this year’s theme is “Eat Right with Color.” This is the American Dietetic Association (ADA)’s way of reminding us to make healthier choices.

“Adding a splash of colorful seasonal foods to your plate makes for more than just a festive meal,” says registered dietitian and ADA Spokesperson Karen Ansel. “A rainbow of foods creates a palette of nutrients, each with a different bundle of potential benefits for a healthful eating plan.”

There are two ways to look at this “eat right with color” advice. One is to look at it from the perspective of MyPyramid. The other is to actually eat foods from every color of the rainbow.

MyPyramid is the symbol that represents the 2005 Dietary Guidelines for Americans’ recommendations. It is a triangle with vertical stripes of orange, green, red, yellow, blue and purple. These represent the five food groups, plus a very small yellow stripe to represent the small amount of fats/oils our bodies need to be healthy.

The orange stripe represents the grain group. For the best nutrition, try to eat at least half of the grains you need in the form of whole grains. These foods, such as whole wheat bread, brown rice and popcorn, include the entire grain and so provide fiber, an assortment of B vitamins, and plenty of carbohydrates to fuel our bodies.

The green stripe is the vegetable group and the red is the fruit group. Generally speaking, these two groups offer a similar “salad” of nutrients, including fiber, vitamins A and C, and then other vitamins, minerals and phytonutrients, depending on their specific color.

The blue stripe stands for milk and foods made from milk. These items provide protein, calcium, vitamin A and for milk itself, added vitamin D.

The purple stripe represents foods from the meat and beans group. These foods are great sources of protein and iron. Some also have vitamin B-12, and some beans and dried peas also have a bonus of fiber.

We can also look at this from the perspective of actually eating foods from every color of the rainbow. By doing so, we get the variety of nutrients that are needed for healthy body function.

Many red fruits and vegetables, such as beets, cherries, cranberries, rhubarb, tomatoes (whole or as sauce or soup), and watermelons, contain lycopene and may help promote healthy heart, vision, immunity and may reduce some cancer risks.

Orange and deep yellow fruits and vegetables, including carrots, pumpkins, butternut squash, mangos, apricots, and cantaloupe, contain alpha- and beta-carotene (the precursor of vitamin A), and other nutrients and may help promote healthy vision, immunity, and reduce the risk of some cancers. Other orange/yellow produce contain vitamin C and health-boosting flavinoids. Such fruits and vegetables include oranges and orange juice, yellow grapefruit, peaches, lemons, papaya, pineapple, and nectarines.

Green produce indicates antioxidant potential and that means nutrients like lutein and zeaxanthin. These may help promote healthy vision and reduce risk of some cancers. These include artichoke, asparagus, avocado, broccoli, green beans, green peppers, leafy greens like spinach, honeydew, and kiwi.

Blue and purple produce is a little harder to come by, but it does have a powerful nutrient punch. The anthocyanins and other nutrients offer antioxidant and anti-aging benefits. They may also help with memory, urinary tract health and reduced cancer risks. Examples include blackberries, blueberries, eggplant, plums, purple cabbage, and raisins.

Although we do not usually think of white, tan and brown as being very colorful, produce of these colors can contain allyl sulfides and other sulfur compounds that may help maintain heart health and lower cancer risks. Foods in this category include bananas, cauliflower, dates, figs, garlic, mushrooms, onions, and parsnips.

There are lots and lots of colorful choices to choose from. Start in March with a few and then decide to make “eating right with color” a healthy habit throughout the year. For more ideas on eating right with color, visit <http://www.eatright.org>

For more information on this or any other subject, contact your local University of Missouri Extension office. MU Extension programs are open to all.

*(Written March 11, 2011)*