

# GETTING KIDS TO EAT THEIR VEGGIES



by Meryl Brandwein, RD/LDN

*There is no question that children need to eat their vegetables.*

Studies indicate, however, that the majority of children and adolescents aren't even consuming half of what the daily recommendations are for fruits and vegetables. The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) recommends that adolescents and adults consume five to thirteen servings of fruits and vegetables daily. This equals about 2 ½- 6 ½ cups, depending upon caloric intake. For a person eating approximately 2000 calories per day this would be about 4 ½ cups per day. Young children ages 6 and under require only slightly fewer servings per day and should still consume a minimum of 2 cups of vegetables and one cup of fruit. Although we know that children should

be eating their fruits and veggies, the toughest piece of this puzzle is getting them to actually put them in their mouths. We all know those faces that kids make when they are faced with eating foods they would rather not try. What is it about vegetables that children don't like? Generally, it's that bitter flavor which most children, and often adults, dislike. While this "taste" perception is an inherited trait, we cannot simply blame our DNA for our dislike of vegetables. Research indicates that across cultures people generally prefer foods that taste sweet and dislike bitter flavors. This makes sense from an evolutionary perspective, as sweetness is associated with foods that provide energy needed for survival, as in the case of mother's milk. Bitterness often signals the presence of a toxin. Though this built in warning mechanism may have helped our ancestors survive and evolve years ago, there is little evidence that an acute sense

of taste offers health protection. In fact, this very trait may prove to be more of a detriment. Many healthy phytochemicals, vitamins and antioxidants are found in bitter vegetables. Brussels sprouts, kale and arugula, all highly nutritious vegetables, have a bitter taste. There is hope however. Adding in sweeter foods or cooking them in such a way to bring out their natural sweetness can temper the bitterness in foods. Salt and strong spices such as chili, ginger and garlic can also help reduce the bitter taste.

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Inherited traits alone cannot be blamed for not liking specific foods. Here it is still a case of nurture vs. nature. Dr. Julie Mennella, PhD., a scientist at the Monell Chemical Senses Center in Philadelphia has done much research in this area. According to Dr. Mennella's research food chemicals with distinct tastes and smells are transmitted to the amniotic fluid that supports the growing fetus. The fetus also swallows this fluid and can sense the flavors lending credibility to the notion that taste and smell are fairly well developed in utero. Thus, the more fruits and vegetables the mother eats, the more accustomed the baby will become to these flavors.

As children transition from infancy to toddlers the "nurture" factor begins to take over when it comes to developing eating patterns. Rules of eating are learned from caregivers. Adult role models teach children the how's and why's of eating. Childhood is the time when children learn to associate both positive and negative experiences with food. Whether it is part of a celebration or family tradition, certain events enhance a child's experience with a given food. In contrast a negative experience

will also create a negative food association. For example, "finish your vegetables or you cannot go play on your computer" usually creates a negative food association. Bribing children with food tends to reinforce the negative associations with that food. According to Jennifer Orlet Fischer, Ph.D., an expert on the development of eating behavior in children, young children learn to prefer foods that are familiar and ones that are considered acceptable in their homes.

The best way to teach children that foods, such as vegetables are delicious and healthy is to eat them yourself. Research conducted by Dr. Fisher shows that parents who eat lots of fruits and vegetables generally had children who also ate vegetables as well; whereas parents who did not consume plenty of fruits and vegetables had children who had lower intakes of fruits and vegetables. Additionally, research shows that it takes between 10-15 tastes before a child will learn to appreciate a new flavor. Bottom line, if you want your family to eat a healthier diet, you must set a good example and show them how to do it.



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**Teaching children how to develop a taste for vegetables can be a daunting task for any parent. Here are some ideas how to help.**



*Cut or chop greens such as kale, collards, spinach, swiss chard and the like, finely. It should look similar to parsley when chopped. You can then add this to sauces such as marinara, meat mixtures such as meatballs, meatloaf, chili, and tacos. Kids may see the green slightly, but they won't be able to taste the bitter flavor associated with these deep greens.*



*Cut vegetables in small pieces and add them to soups. Vegetables such as carrots, turnips, parsnips, and celery can be added and even pureed a bit so as to hide them.*



*Creating purees from vegetables such as squash, for example, are great ways to add nutrition and flavor without anyone knowing it's there. Steam squash (if its zucchini be sure to peel it or it will turn your mixture green, and that may be a turn off) then puree it, with flax milk or coconut milk and add to any sauce, or meat mixture.*

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Vegetables in the cabbage family, such as broccoli, Brussels sprouts and Cauliflower can be paired well with flavors such as

Bacon (turkey with no nitrates or sulfites): Brand: Willshire Farms or Applegate Farms	Toasted nuts and Seeds: Almonds, Pecans, Walnuts, Sunflower, Sesame and Pumpkin	Creamy sauces: Lowfat versions of cheese cream sauce, or cream sauce made from nuts.	Don't over cook. It depletes the nutritional benefit and makes the veggies mushy and unpleasant.
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Dark Leafy Greens: Kale, Collard Greens, Swiss Chard, Dandelion greens, Arugula

Balance the bitterness with sour flavors such as lemon or lime juice	Vinegars: Champagne, apple cider, rice wine or balsamic are good choices	Creamy dressings or sauces (see Recipe)	Rich flavorful cheeses
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#### California Creamed Kale

##### Ingredients

One bunch of Kale, cut up into small squares  
1 tbsp. of ghee  
1-cup plain unsweetened almond or flax milk  
½ cup of raw cashews  
1 tbsp. of dehydrated onion flakes  
1 tsp coconut oil

##### Recipe Directions:

Sauté Kale in ghee for a few minutes until Kale begins to wilt, but is still bright green. Mix all other ingredients in Vita mix until smooth. Add to Kale and stir. Serve immediately.

#### MBN Crispy Cauliflower

##### Ingredients:

4 cup cauliflower, cut into large florets  
1 packet onion soup mix, dry  
1/4 cup mayonnaise, reduced fat  
1/4 cup sour cream, low fat  
3 tbsp. crispy onions

##### Recipe Directions:

1. Preheat oven to 350 degrees. 2. Cut cauliflower into large sections, place in steamer basket and steam until tender. 3. Place cauliflower in roasting pan, coated with non stick spray. 4. Mix together onion soup mix, mayonnaise and sour cream in a separate bowl. 5. Rub onion soup mixture over the cauliflower and coat well. Sprinkle crispy onions over the cauliflower mixture and broil for 5 minutes or until cauliflower begins to get crispy.

Meryl Brandwein, a Registered Dietitian/Licensed Nutritionist practices in South Florida. She has special expertise in Functional Integrative Nutrition Therapy and Food Sensitivities testing. Meryl is also an accomplished author writing articles for the Miami Herald, Sun Sentinel, Sports Link, South Florida Magazine and other publications.