

Meal Prep Fruits and Vegetables

Happy National Fruits & Veggies month! In September, we celebrate all the healthy fruits and vegetables we enjoy throughout the year. The 2022 theme, *Celebrating The Roots Of Our Food*, offers an opportunity for everyone to celebrate all the good fruits and veggies brought to our tables. After all, they are at the root of our diets, health, and well-being.

Fresh fruits and vegetables are among the most nutrient-dense foods on the earth. They are full of minerals, fiber, antioxidants, and vitamins. Whole plant foods offer many benefits for your health, so they are certainly not something you want to waste.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends eating 1 1/2 to 2 cups of fruit and 2 to 3 cups of vegetables daily. If you are interested in how much you should eat based on age and gender, you can go to myplate.gov.

As our days get busier, finding time to cook can get harder and harder. I have decided to provide tips to help you slash your meal prep time. Meal prep is a great way to help you to eat more fruits and vegetables throughout the week.

It can seem a little overwhelming to chop, dice, and slice up fruits and veggies for multiple recipes at once, but it does not need to be. With some forethought and handy tips, you will be a produce-chopping and produce-storing pro.

Wash kitchen utensils and food preparation surfaces, including chopping boards and countertops, before and after preparing fruits and vegetables. Make sure to always wash hands with hot soapy water, for at least 20 seconds, before and after handling fresh produce.

Before peeling, cutting, or eating your produce, ensure to wash it **all**, unless the package says the contents have been washed. Germs on the exterior of your fruit or vegetables can be transferred to the portion you eat when you slice them open or peel them. When washing your produce, the water should be 10 degrees warmer than the temperature of the produce to prevent thermal shock and absorption of water and bacteria to the inside cells. Do not wash fruits and vegetables with bleach, disinfecting products, soap, or detergent because it can absorb the product, change the taste, or be poisonous.

The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) recommends removing the outermost leaves of leafy greens, like head lettuce and cabbage, before washing since they carry the most significant risk of contaminants.

Fragile items (mushrooms) and soft fruits (berries) can be washed using a sink sprayer or a gentle stream of water. Place food in a colander and gently turn it as you spray with water.

Rinse and scrub firm produce with a tough rind or peel. Using running water, rinse the produce and gently scrub it for two or more minutes. It is the act of friction that's important for the removal of microbes. Use a clean cloth, your hands, or a dedicated produce scrubber.

After washing the produce, dry them gently using a cloth or paper towel.

Now it may be time to peel the produce. Cut the produce as desired.

Once cut or peeled, fresh produce should be refrigerated within 2 hours, so throw it away if left out for longer.

To prevent vegetables from drying in the refrigerator, store them in an airtight container with a damp paper towel on top of the cut vegetables.

With fruit, unless you are cooking it, it is best to chop it as close to mealtime as possible. Many fruits are susceptible to oxidation or browning and should be prepped as needed.

When stored in airtight containers in the refrigerator, most fruits and vegetables will last 3 to 5 days after being cut.

When meal prepping, you should not feel overwhelmed.

The University of Wyoming Extension encourages everyone to use September as an opportunity to create new fruit and vegetable habits: simply adding one or more fruit and veggie to their daily routines or even experiencing one you have never tried!

(Sources: cdc.gov, fda.gov; fruitsandveggies.org, www.myplate.gov, snaped.fns.usda.gov, usda.gov)