Summer fruits, vegetables boost opportunities for healthier eating

Abundance can help turn around American’s normal eating patterns, says K-State expert

By Pat Melgares, K-State Research and Extension news service

MANHATTAN, Kan. – If there’s ever a time to buck American’s tendency to fall short on their consumption of fruits and vegetables, summer is it.

“Summer is the perfect time to think of new fruits and vegetables that we can incorporate into our meals,” said Ashley Svaty, K-State Research and Extension’s Northwest Area Family and Consumer Sciences specialist.

“Hopefully, you have a local farmers’ market you can go to, but if you don’t, produce at the grocery store is going to be cheaper now because it is more abundant.”

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and other organizations have reported that barely 10% of Americans regularly meet the daily recommendation for eight servings of fruits and vegetables. Svaty said Kansans fall smack dab in that range – only 10% of residents eat enough fruit daily, and just 8% get enough vegetables.

As a guideline, the U.S. Department of Agriculture defines a serving as a full cup of raw vegetables or fruit; or a half-cup of cooked vegetables.

“I’m always looking for tips on how we can eat more fruits and vegetables, and I think it comes down to it needing to be easy, convenient and really fast to get to,” Svaty said. “And we need to make it a habit, so one habit I like to share is to keep a bowl of fresh fruit out so that you can see it when you walk into the kitchen. If you’re hungry for a snack... you’re probably going to grab that instead of looking into the cabinet for something a little less nutritious.”

Svaty said summer selections provide many fun opportunities to incorporate fruits and vegetables into meals: Think skewers with fun fruit shapes including watermelon, grapes, blueberries, kiwi, cantaloupe or even grape tomatoes.
“I love anything on a skewer,” Svaty said. “And think of kids. They are going to have fun eating that compared to the same fruit or vegetable on a plate. Kids are going to eat more fruits and vegetables when they see you doing it. So be a role model to them.”

Summer dips – including yogurt – also helps to encourage adults and kids to eat various fruits and vegetables.

“You can also grill vegetables,” Svaty said. “Once our (home) garden takes off, we just have squash and zucchini coming out of our ears. So one of my favorite recipes is to throw squash and onion with herbs and spices into some oil on the grill. And you can do whatever vegetables you want…potatoes, asparagus, and many more.”

Other summer foods often found in greater quantity during the summer include lettuce, cucumbers, tomatoes and pickles. Many fruits and vegetables can be canned or frozen for use later on.

When grilling proteins, Svaty also recommends making extra food that can be eaten as leftovers. Re-heat in the microwave so that the internal temperature reaches 165 degrees Fahrenheit. Doing so reduces the use of the oven, which keeps heat out of the house during hotter days.

If cooking indoors, she adds, “cook multiple meals in the oven, and cook in the morning when it’s cooler.”

More ideas for healthy eating year-round is available online from K-State Research and Extension’s food, nutrition, dietetics and health program.

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Extension food, nutrition, dietetics and health, www.ksre.k-state.edu/humannutrition

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