

Letter to the Editor: The Pundit Speaks

By Randolph M. Howes, M.D., Ph.D.

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“Fruits and Vegetables Low on American Diets”

The 1989 National Research Council *Diet and Health* report supported consumption of 5 fruit and vegetable servings per day and the 1991 National Cancer Institute–DHHS also supported the 5-A-Day Program. Surprisingly, the 2010 Journal of the National Cancer Institute reported fruits and vegetables do not dramatically lower the risk of common diseases, including cancer. However, 5-A-Day consumption of fruit and veggies has remained a centerpiece of our diet but only about 30% of the population followed the 5-A-Day recommendations. A new 2015 report reveals that Americans are not meeting national recommendations for consumption of fruits and vegetables. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) 2015 analysis concludes that only 13.1% of American adults eat enough fruits and only 8.9% eat enough vegetables. Authors used data for 2013 from the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS), which in 2013 covered 373,580 respondents. The CDC analysis used the most recent national survey of median daily frequency of fruit and vegetable intake and showed that states varied widely in their consumption. California ranked highest in consumption of both fruits (17.7% of adults) and vegetables (13%), while at the bottom of the list were Tennessee for fruit consumption (7.5%) and Mississippi for vegetable consumption (5.5%). Some still believe that eating more fruits and vegetables increases intake of essential nutrients and reduces the risk for heart disease, strokes and some cancers and fruits and vegetables may also help manage body weight when eaten instead of more energy-dense foods. However, Professor Walter Willet of Harvard University said the research strongly confirmed the findings of other studies, showing "that any association of intake and fruits and vegetables with risk of cancer is weak at best." It was "already known" that people who said they ate lots of fruit and vegetables were health conscious, educated and better-off. Still, as the new CDC study indicates, Americans appear to be stuck at a low level of fruit and vegetable consumption. A 2014 study found the more fruit and vegetables people ate, the less likely they were to die - at any age. Fresh vegetables had the strongest protective effect, followed by salad and then fruit. Fruit juice conferred no benefit, while canned fruit appeared to increase the risk of death. A different analysis looked at 16 studies and found there was a threshold around five servings of fruit and vegetables a day, after which the risk of all cause mortality did not reduce further.

In the America that I love, we should remember that dietary supplements do not take the place of fresh fruits and vegetables and that they do not have the same effect in the body. Eat healthy, stop smoking, be active and avoid being overweight.

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