Dear Alice,

What tests do I use to tell if a vegetable contains beta-carotene?

Signed,

Orange you curious too

Answer

Dear Orange you curious too,

Beta-carotene is just one out of hundreds of a family of plant pigments termed carotenoids. You may have heard of some of the other plant chemicals (phytochemicals)? lycopene, lutein, alpha-carotene, and zeaxanthin, among others. In particular, beta-carotene is a provitamin A carotenoid: it can be made into vitamin A by the body. Some research has linked diets high in beta-carotene and vitamin A to lower rates of some kinds of cancer. (Similar studies on beta-carotene supplements haven't shown the same association.) Other carotenoids may have similar health-promoting effects.

Carotenoids are found in fruits and vegetables that are red, orange, and deep yellow in color, and in some dark green leafy vegetables too. While there are no home tests, if you wish to compare different foods' beta-carotene content, check out the USDA National Nutrient Database [2] for beta-carotene. Be advised that at the moment no DRIs (Dietary Reference Intakes) have been established for any of the carotenoids. However, there are recommended dietary allowances (RDAs) for vitamin A: 3000 IU (900 mcg) a day for men and 2310 IU (700 mcg) a day for women? and foods rich in beta-carotene can help you meet these levels.

It's always a good bet to eat lots of fruits and vegetables? especially ones of all different colors. Trying to include red, green, and orange vegetables or fruits every day can be attractive, tasty, healthy, and fun! For more information about beta-carotene, check out the related Q&As listed below.

Alice!

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Published date:
Jan 21, 2000
Last reviewed on:
May 22, 2015

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