Cooking veggies and vitamin loss? [1]

Dear Alice,

If I simmer or boil vegetables in water until they are soft when making soups that have vegetables as ingredients, is any of the nutrient content of the vegetables broken down and lost for good, or does it merely move out of the vegetables into the water? In that case, since you eat the broth when you eat the soup, you would be getting all of the nutrients of the vegetables from the broth. I'm confused about this. Please help.

Answer

Dear Reader,

Vegetables can be a wonderful source of vitamins, minerals, and other nutrients that people need to stay healthy. The problem is that preparation can put a damper on the benefits that vegetables provide. In fact, according to the American Dietetic Association (ADA), improper preparation can cut the nutrient content of certain fruits and vegetables in half.

When cooking vegetables in water, some of the nutrient content, especially water-soluble vitamins including vitamins B and C, may leach into the surrounding water. But, as you suggest, using that water (or broth) in a soup or a gravy can, in fact, be a way of saving those nutrients and putting them to good use.

Still, high temperatures and long cooking times can degrade vitamins that are more sensitive to heat. While this is hard to avoid with soups, it is much less of a concern than leached and wasted vitamins.

If you're planning on preparing vegetables to eat alone, you may want to try steaming them briefly until they are crisp and tender. It's almost always best to keep cooking times low: microwaving, steaming, blanching, and stir-frying take the cake when it comes to speed. Also, you may want to eat your veggies raw; salads and crudité are a great way to enjoy fresh vegetables and their full range of nutrients. Generally, the less cooked the better? overcooked vegetables don't only lose nutritional content, they also lose much of their flavor and color. This doesn't mean you should stop adding vegetables to your soup. The ADA recommends that you consume at least 3 to 5 servings of vegetables every day, so it may be a good idea to vary your preparation on a daily basis. Bon appetit!
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