

Veggie Dilemma: Fresh, Frozen, or Canned

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Which type of vegetable has the most nutrients—fresh, frozen, or canned? Fresh, is best, you say? Not necessarily. In fact, it probably doesn't matter which type you choose to buy.

Fresh vegetables are often picked before their nutrient content has peaked. Then they could spend up to two weeks in transit to the grocery store. After that, they may sit in the store a few days before they are bought. Add to that the number of days they spend in the refrigerator before they are cooked. By the time they are actually eaten, they may not be so fresh anymore, and some nutrients will have been lost.

Canned and frozen vegetables have the advantage of being harvested at their peak when they have the highest level of nutrients, and they are processed immediately. However, the heating process used to can vegetables causes a small loss of nutrients, but no more than they would lose during cooking at home. Some nutrients are also lost in the freezing process, though frozen vegetables may be slightly higher in nutrients than canned ones.

The loss of nutrients in canned or frozen vegetables really isn't that significant. For example, the vitamin A content of a carrot is so high that even if it loses half in the canning process, it is still an excellent source of vitamin A. And if you compare the vitamin C in one-half cup of raw broccoli to one-half cup of frozen broccoli, the difference is very small.

It's probably not so important what kind of vegetables you buy, as it is that you do eat vegetables. Three to five servings a day are recommended. A serving is about 1 cup of raw vegetables or ½ cup of cooked vegetables.

To get the most nutrients from your vegetables, try to purchase those that are in season. Buy locally grown vegetables when possible, or grow your own. Buy only what you can use in a few days and keep them refrigerated. Use small amounts of water when cooking—or steam or microwave them—and keep them covered. Be careful not to overcook vegetables. Leaving the peeling on will help to retain nutrients, also.

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