

A healthy diet can give you an edge on wellness – Food as Medicine

As our experience with coronavirus continues to unfold, all of us are seeking any possible advantage in protecting ourselves. A healthy diet could provide an indirect, but considerable benefit, as it does with so many health and wellness concerns.

When we stop to think about what we put into our bodies as fuel, it's also important to think about the long-term effects it can have on our well-being. With more options than ever for how to “eat healthy” – from eating organic, to shopping local, eating vegan or KETO, low-carb and no-carb diets, to name a few – the foods we choose can have lasting implications for our health and the diseases we may be at risk for.

A healthy diet will not make you immune to coronavirus, or any virus. But, eating well can help boost your immune system, which is your first line of defense against illness. If you do contract a virus, a strong immune system improves your ability to fight the infection.

In a more general sense, current research shows that dietary habits can directly affect the types of diseases we become most vulnerable to. While certain foods can lead to chronic health issues, there are many others that can provide strong medicinal and homeopathic qualities. Vegetables, for example, are a powerhouse for disease prevention. High in vitamins and nutrients, veggies are packed with all the healthy ingredients needed to fuel and satisfy our bodies.

Additionally, making small changes in diet and nutrition can go a long way in reversing the effects of illnesses like diabetes and hypertension and can even aid in cancer prevention. In recent years, the food-as-medicine movement has grown exponentially as food has become a formal part of the medical treatment process.

Knowing what to fuel your body with is essential when it comes to using food as medicine. Combining fresh, nutritious foods like vegetables, fruits, beans, and whole grains along with proteins and healthy fats provide numerous health benefits – like protecting the cells in our bodies from becoming damaged, boosting our immune systems, and decreasing chronic inflammation. When thoughtfully combined, food can be a preventive agent in achieving better health.

And a way to make this all happen is right in our own backyards.

Shopping local can help take the guess work out of what is going into our bodies. When you buy from a local farmers' market, you get to know the whole story of where your food came from. Whether purchasing fresh produce or buying meats and poultry from a farmer who raises pastured livestock, shopping local is one of the best ways to ensure you know exactly what you're eating.

And the best part about fresh food is that it tastes better! When shipping perishable foods of any kind, there are always challenges to keeping food fresh. Usually, products arrive at grocery stores many days after they've been packaged. That means, by the time you get them home, a week or more could have passed from when they were first picked.

By shopping at a local farmers' market, you know that the fruits, vegetables, even the meats and breads you're selecting are fresh, in season, and have been picked at the height of ripeness. And it's no secret that fresh food tastes better.

During the COVID crisis, shopping local has become more convenient. Local farmers and fish mongers have set up online ordering and home delivery systems. You can find some of them via Farm Fresh R.I., a local non-profit dedicated to connecting area growers with residents.

The bottom line? Food does much more than simply provide fuel for our bodies; it plays an important role in our overall health. Choosing foods that are fresh and nutrient-dense can change the course of our health history and keep us living longer, healthier lives.

While in the current environment it is not certain when and if outdoor farmer's markets will take place, remember these tips for maximizing your daily or weekly visits.

- Arrive early for the best selection
- Arrive late for the best deals
- Walk the entire market before making selections
- Ask what's at the peak of its season
- Go with a budget
- Bring a bag
- Have cash

For more information on local farmers markets and growers, and to learn more about the sustainable and healthy food system in our region, visit <https://www.farmfreshri.org/>.