

## **Fruit and Vegetables: Health Perspectives**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Ever since the discovery of the vital amines, or vitamins as we know them today, the history of nutrition has been the history of the role of individual food components in human health. Such knowledge has led to the recognition and treatment of nutrient deficiencies.

More recently nutritional science has explored the role of nutrients in 'optimal' health, rather than the avoidance of deficiencies. Fruits and vegetables in particular have been found to contain a host of biologically active non-nutrient compounds, in addition to their nutrient complement, which might confer health protection, and epidemiology indicates that a diet rich in these food items does indeed appear to reduce the risk of a range of chronic diseases.

In the latter part of the twentieth century, research focus on the biochemical role and biological activity of the individual components of fruits and vegetables has brought insight into possible mechanisms for the health benefits of fruits and vegetables. The challenge of the twenty-first century is to appreciate and understand that the qualities of whole foods and diets can be more than, or different from, the sum of their parts and that all the information gained so far is practically useless unless it is understood and can be acted upon by the general public in their everyday life.

The rise of agriculture and industry has allowed unprecedented access to food. Science and technology has allowed the formulation of foods and food ingredients that pander to our Achilles heel; a love of salt, sweet and fatty foods. Our intake of fruits and vegetables (and the health promoting nutrients and non-nutrients they contain) has plummeted, whilst intake of refined cereals has increased, and we have optimised food foraging so that it requires minimal energy expenditure. All these changes have had consequences for human health and for social and health care costs, which are becoming intolerable.

So what are we doing?

On the research front very little resource is directed towards longer-term experimental studies of whole foods, and even less to whole diet studies.

Campaigns to increase fruit and vegetable consumption are having a hard time in the face of market pressures to entice us to eat foods of higher market value. We are also surrounded by food outlets selling foods we are asked to 'eat less of'. It is not surprising that market surveys indicate that we are battling hard just to slow the decline in fruit and vegetable consumption.

Governments have set targets for healthier eating and reduced diet related disease and have supported the fruit and vegetable message, but processes are not in place to ensure a substantial change in consumer behaviour.

Diet and health issue need to be taken more seriously by all concerned and diets rich in fruits and vegetables need to be promoted more aggressively with supportive action and/or legislation. If this doesn't happen we will fail in targets set for increased consumption of fruits and vegetables and reduced chronic disease rates. This in turn will have repercussions for quality of life, health and social costs across Europe.