# Why every South African needs to eat more vegetables and fruit every day

Issued by Association for Dietetics in South Africa

7 Oct 2021

In the second pandemic year with new variants rising and straining the country, the health of South Africans remains a top-of-mind concern. Covid-19 is not our only battle. The country has high levels of diet and lifestyle-related non-communicable diseases (NCDs) such as hypertension and Type 2 diabetes, as well as both significant under- and over-nutrition challenges. All of these conditions make us more vulnerable to the coronavirus, but also highlight how much power we have over our health simply through our daily food choices. This is the message from an alliance of South African health organisations who are collaborating with the Department of Health and the Department of Basic Education to promote the 2021 National Nutrition Week theme, **"Eat more vegetables and fruits every day"**.

The National Department of Health (NDoH) points out that increasing access to fresh vegetables and fruits, and then including at least five portions of them in our diet every day, can make a significant impact on overall health, as well as mitigate the risks of serious diet-related illnesses. The NDoH also indicated that 2021 is the United Nations (UN) International Year of Fruits and Vegetables, and South Africa is part of the global effort to raise awareness amongst our people that there are good reasons why vegetables and fruits are essential in healthy diets and should be eaten every day. Our own South African Food-based Dietary Guidelines include: "Eat plenty of vegetables and fruit." Despite this, research shows that many South Africans eat far less vegetables and fruits than we need to maintain our health. Rising obesity and persistent under-nutrition are prevalent in many of our communities. We also know that when it comes to accessing foods, there's an abundance of nutritionally poor, highly processed foods yet a scarcity when it comes to a variety of seasonal vegetables and fruits. All stakeholders need to come together to help communities and families access fresh vegetables and fruits, and to encourage South Africans to improve the quality of their nutrition by eating more fresh produce every day.

The Department of Basic Education's (DBE) Deputy Director-General, Dr Granville Whittle says, "Awareness of nutrition and health is already embedded in the South African curriculum, yet too often, children can't put what they learn into practice in their school community or in their homes due to a lack of daily access to vegetables and fruits. School, community and home food gardens are a strategic way to boost access to fresh produce and make it possible for children to pick fruit from trees or pull carrots from the garden when they need a snack. From lunchboxes and the school nutrition programme to tuckshops, school environments need support so that they can become nutrient-rich places where healthy eating is encouraged, affordable and possible."

Ms Lumka Mphatsoe, Chief Director Communication of Social Development, says: “Section 27 (1) (b) of the South African Constitution states that “everyone has the right to have access to sufficient food”. The national theme, "Eat more vegetables and fruit every day", is so relevant based on the prevailing situation of the pandemic where the support of the sector to the vulnerable and needy provided limited support of more vegetables and fruits. As a sector we will continue to encourage our communities to consume more vegetables and fruit in their diets, we will also continue to share these messages of healthy eating beyond National Nutrition Week especially for our grant beneficiaries which includes, caregivers, pregnant and lactating mothers.”

For the President of ADSA (Association for Dietetics in South Africa), Maria van der Merwe, this year’s theme could not be more crucial. “Eating more vegetables and fruits every day, as well as more variety is simply fundamental to healthy diets. Due to Covid, there’s a lot of focus on supporting immune systems, and eating a variety of veg and fruit are essential to achieve this. Some South Africans are shifting towards more plant-based diets, which has become a worldwide healthy eating trend. But we also need a co-ordinated effort to help many South African families access an affordable variety of fresh produce. This includes our indigenous vegetables, which are nutrient-rich and can be grown in home and community gardens. Diets rich in vegetables and fruits support the immune system and protect against diseases while enabling our bodies to fight back better from infections and reduce the risks of obesity, heart disease, diabetes and certain cancers.”

The Heart and Stroke Foundation South Africa (HSFSA) is also a partner in the 2021 National Nutrition Week. CEO Professor Pamela Naidoo says, “South Africa has one of the highest rates of overweight and obesity in the world which are major contributors to cardiovascular disease, a co-morbidity associated with poor Covid-19 outcomes. What we eat each day really does matter. By including a minimum of five vegetables and fruits in our diet every day, we are actively protecting our heart health and reducing the risk of high blood pressure. There are many different ways to include both raw

and cooked produce in our meals and snacks, so that no matter your food preferences and food culture, you can always find ways to rather choose a fruit or raw vegetable when you need a snack; include more salads at meal-times and in lunchboxes; and, add more kinds of vegetables to your sandwiches, soups, stews, curries, roasts and even braais."

Carol Browne of the Nutrition Society of South Africa (NSSA) recommends following four principles when it comes to meeting the recommended minimum of five portions of vegetables and fruit each day:

1. **Always include vegetables in meals** – "Adding vegetables and herbs to your meals makes them more delicious as well as more nutritious. When you are planning and preparing meals make it a priority to see how many different vegetables you can add. Whether you are cooking a stir-fry, a pasta, a sauce or an egg dish, vegetables will only enhance it in every way."

2. **Eat raw vegetables and fresh fruit** – "Too often, when we think of snacks, we reach for chips or sweets that have little to no nutritional value. Getting into the routine of snacking on fruits and veg is a healthy eating habit we can model for our children."

3. **Eat fresh vegetables and fruit that are in season** – "Seasonal produce is more affordable and by focusing on eating winter veg and fruits in winter and summer veg and fruits in summer, you can access more fruit and veg every day. Growing your own puts you in touch with seasonal produce, and many vegetables, fruits, leafy vegetables and herbs can be grown at home, even in containers."

4. **Eat a variety of vegetables and fruits** – "Different veg and fruit offer different health-boosting micronutrients, and that's why eating a variety helps you get good overall nutrition. A helpful goal is to make choices based on a variety of colours. For example, white onion, , orange butternut, leafy greens and purple beetroot give you much more nutrition from a meal than eating one large portion of just one type of vegetable. Aim to have a health-boosting rainbow on your plate."

Another collaborator for National Nutrition Week is Grow Great, a child-focused campaign working towards the goal of zero stunting in South Africa by 2030. For growing children, the message to eat veg and fruit daily is essential as it sets up healthy eating habits that can last a lifetime.

Duduzile Mkhize of Grow Great says, "First of all, there's no better food for babies than breastmilk, and mothers need to be supported in their families and communities to breastfeed exclusively up until six months. Once your baby is six months and over, you can start to introduce appropriate foods to complement ongoing breastfeeding which should include vegetables and fruits. Cooked leafy greens such spinach, chard or marog can easily be finely chopped and orange veg such as cooked butternut and carrot are easily mashed to feed baby. As your children grow, making sure they snack on veg and fruit, and eat vegetables with every meal to promote healthy growth and development, while protecting them against illness."

Wits Health Consortium, funded by the UK Better Health Programme South Africa (BHPSA), a new National Nutrition Week partner, works to reduce the country's high prevalence of non-communicable diseases through social and behaviour change communication. Sara Nieuwoudt, Wits Health Consortium Team Lead at BHPSA says, "People's consumption of vegetables and fruits is directly related to their socio-economic situations and food environments. This campaign highlights that there is a need for multiple public and private sectors to work together to increase the availability of affordable vegetables and fruits in our communities, schools and workplaces. Industries that produce and market ultra-processed foods and beverages need to be held accountable for the unhealthy foods that contribute to diseases such as diabetes, cancers and hypertension. Decision-makers and market leaders need to make healthy choices easy, especially for people who are struggling with their monthly food budgets."

**Tips to include more vegetables and fruit every day on a budget include:**

- Growing your own is one of the best ways to access more veg and fruit at a low cost. Even if you have limited garden space, you can still grow in containers, on balconies or verandas. Alternatively, get involved in your local school or

community garden where you can trade volunteer time for produce.
- Get together with neighbours, family and friends to buy seasonal veg and fruit in bulk.
- Look out for supermarket specials on frozen or canned produce. Rinse and drain canned produce using clean water to avoid salt and sugar that is added during processing.
- To prevent produce spoiling which wastes money, buy vegetables and fruit that stay fresh for longer, such as butternut, carrots, cabbage, beetroot, onions, apples and oranges.
- Save money and improve your health by reducing your intake of ultra-processed and takeaway foods, as well as sugary beverages and unhealthy snacks. Use this to rather buy more veg and fruit that can become your children's daily go-to snack foods.

For additional information on how to eat more vegetables and fruit every day including tips, shopping advice, meal planning hacks and delicious recipes, visit www.nutritionweek.co.za.

**National Nutrition Week 2021 collaborators include:**

1. National and provincial Departments of Health
2. Department of Basic Education
3. Department of Social Development
4. The Association for Dietetics in South Africa (ADSA)
5. The Nutrition Society of South Africa (NSSA)
6. The Heart and Stroke Foundation SA (HSFSA)
7. Grow Great Campaign
8. Better Health Programme South Africa (BHPSA)
9. Department of Social Development
10. South African Military Health Services (SAMHS)
11. The Cancer Association of South Africa (CANSA)
12. Division of Human Nutrition, Department of Global Health, University of Stellenbosch
13. Consumer Goods Council of South Africa (CGCSA)


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