

# Cooking to Preserve Nutrients

*Cooking has an impact on the nutrient content of foods. As soon as a fruit or vegetable is picked, it begins to lose nutrients. Generally, the best way to get the most nutrients from your produce is by eating it raw—but that's not always realistic.*

While fruit is mostly consumed raw, other foods like vegetables, grains, legumes, and animal proteins are often consumed after cooking. While cooking can destroy some nutrients, it can also make other nutrients more easily absorbed and used by the body. The cooking process also:

- Makes high-fiber foods and animal proteins easier to digest
- Makes foods that are hard or tough in their raw form easier to chew
- Destroys parts of plants that can be harmful

Because there are benefits to both cooked and raw foods, it's best to eat a variety of both every day to maximize your intake of beneficial nutrients.

## COOKING TIPS

- **Use gentle methods.** To maximize nutrient content, use as little heat, liquid, and time as possible to cook your food.
- **Choose the right fat.** Foods cooked on high heat should use a fat or oil with a high smoke point. Fats heated beyond their smoke point can be harmful.
- **Skip plastic in the microwave.** Use glass or ceramic containers—harmful chemicals can leach out of plastic and into your food.
- **Make soups and stews.** Nutrients that leach out of individual foods end up in the cooking liquid, which is eaten as part of the meal.

## COOKING METHODS

**Bake or Roast:** Foods are gently cooked using hot dry air, usually in an oven. Because no liquid is added, most vitamins, minerals, and nutrients remain in the food. Baking cooks foods that lack solid structure until solid (cakes, muffins); roasting cooks foods that have a solid structure (meat, vegetables).

**Boil or Blanch:** Uses hot water (212°F / 100°C). Boiling is longer (5–20 min) and blanching is quick (about 1 min). Because boiling is intense, most nutrients leach into the cooking liquid; if drained, many vitamins and minerals are lost. To get the most nutrients, blanch when possible or consume the liquid (as in a soup or stew).

**Fry or Sauté:** Foods are cooked quickly in a small amount of hot fat or oil. Healthy fats like olive oil help your body absorb fat-soluble nutrients (vitamins A, D, E, and K). Consume any liquid released from vegetables, as some vitamins and minerals leach out during cooking.

**Microwave:** Electromagnetic waves heat food by stimulating its molecules. This is generally quick with water-based foods; foods with fats and oils heat less evenly and may need more time. Microwave in glass or ceramic only—never plastic.

**Slow Cook:** Foods cook gently in liquid over low heat for an extended time. Because water-soluble vitamins and minerals leach into the liquid, this method is great for soups, stews, and one-pot meals. To maximize nutrients, cook everything except the vegetables for an extended time, then add vegetables in the last half-hour.

**Steam:** Foods cook gently above (not touching) boiling water. Little water is lost, so most nutrients remain intact. Because no cooking fat is involved, finish steamed food with some fat or oil (avocado, olive oil, nuts) to absorb fat-soluble vitamins.

**Simmer or Poach:** Liquid-based methods that differ by temperature. Simmered food is heated to 185–200°F (85–93°C)—good for sauces, soups, stews, and tough cuts of meat. Poached food stays below 180°F (82°C)—best for delicate foods like eggs, poultry, fish, and fruit, which can dry out with other methods.