

Fruits and vegetables: the healthy eating choice



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Fruit and vegetables are essential to children's proper growth and development. One of the consequences of their gradual disappearance from the diet is childhood obesity, which the World Health Organisation now regards as a pandemic. Childhood obesity affects 16% of Spanish children aged 6 to 12, according to the Ministry of Health and Consumer Affairs.

A diet including at least five daily portions of fruit and vegetables involves great health benefits for all ages.

Fruit and vegetables at each stage of development

Some studies have found a link between a deficiency in folic acid (particularly present in green-leaf vegetables) and lower performance at school. This is just one of the consequences of not enough fruit and vegetables in children's diet. A suitable intake of folic acid and vitamin C is essential to children's development. Fruit and vegetables also help prevent childhood obesity, which is on the rise. Acquiring healthy habits in childhood helps maintain higher quality of life, prevents chronic disease and contributes to longevity.

In adults, the antioxidant and balancing properties of fruit and vegetables make for longer life expectancy and better weight control, owing to their low calorie content and satiating effect. Folic acid-rich vegetables are specially important for pregnant women to prevent birth defects. Vitamin C-rich fruit helps assimilate iron in the diet.

Among the elderly, fruit helps prevent dehydration, because of its high water content, ranging from 75 to 95%. Preventing obesity in old age - by eating fruit and vegetables - is just as important as earlier on, because excess weight has a very adverse effect on chronic diseases that are widespread in the elderly, such as diabetes, heart disease, and so forth. The high fibre content of fruit and vegetables also plays a key role in preventing and treating digestive disorders, which are very prevalent in older age groups.

The role of '5 a day' in promoting fruit and vegetables

The '5 a day' educational programme is an initiative to help prevent childhood obesity and teach healthy eating habits. The scheme operates in over 1200



schools across Spain among children aged 3 to 12. The aims are to teach children about the health benefits of fresh fruit and vegetables, encourage children and their families to take up healthy habits to help prevent childhood obesity, and increase per capita consumption of fruit and vegetables among children.

Fruit and vegetables in figures

The Observatorio del Consumo y la Distribución Alimentaria (food consumption and distribution observatory) reports that in 2005 Spanish consumers spent an average €115.3 on fresh fruit, €83.4 on fresh vegetables and €24.3 on processed fruit and vegetables. This spend translated into annual per capita consumption of 93.2 kg of fresh fruit, 56.2 kg of fresh vegetables and 13.5 kg of processed fruit and vegetables. Fruit and vegetable demand is wide-ranging, but oranges, apples and bananas are the leading products. Seasonal consumption of fruits like melon, watermelon and subtropical fruits was also significant.

