

# Starting veggies young

The best way to get us eating enough vegetables is to start right from when we are young.

By NG KAR FOO and LEE ZHENG YII

IF you walk through the vegetable section in a wet market or hypermarket, you will find all kinds of vegetables in a variety of shapes and colours.

In one corner, you will find green leafy vegetables like spinach and lettuce, and in another, you will find cruciferous vegetables like cauliflower, broccoli and cabbage.

There are also root vegetables like carrots and turnips, as well as fruit vegetables like pumpkin, tomatoes, cucumbers and capsicum.

We are definitely spoiled for choices when it comes to veggies!

## Not enough

Vegetables have long been recognised as essential sources of nutrients to promote health.

However, do you think you are eating enough vegetables?

According to the Malaysian Adult Nutrition Survey 2014, most Malaysian adults do not consume enough vegetables.

On average, an adult consumes 1.6 servings of vegetables daily, much lower than the recommended three servings daily.

Meanwhile, the 2017 National Health and Morbidity Survey's Nutrition Survey found that 92.2% of Malaysian adolescents (Year 4 to Form 5) do not eat enough vegetables.

These numbers show that there is still a lack of awareness on the importance of sufficient consumption of vegetables in the daily diet.

Various studies have shown that regular and adequate consumption of vegetables play crucial roles in preventing various diet-related non-communicable diseases such as diabetes, cardiovascular diseases, hypertension, cancer and obesity.

Vegetables are high in fibre, which aid in digestion and maintain a healthy gut. Their low caloric content is helpful in controlling calorie intake and weight gain.

They are also rich in micronutrients, such as vitamins, minerals and phytonutrients, which play major roles in various metabolic processes in our body.

For example, vitamin A in carrots, red capsicums and pumpkins, can keep eyes and skin healthy, while phytonutrients like lycopene and beta-carotene (from the red and orange colours in vegetables), are important antioxidants that may help improve the

immune response and inhibit cancer growth.

Therefore, nurturing the habit of eating vegetables from young is vital.

This will ensure your child gets used to the taste of vegetables, starts loving to eat them, and subsequently, benefit from them.

## Veggie variety

To get enough essential nutrients from vegetables, the Malaysian Dietary Guidelines recommends at least three servings of vegetables daily.

We can achieve this by having at least one serving of vegetables at each main meal: breakfast, lunch and dinner.

Be sure to eat vegetables of different types and colours in order to obtain maximise your intake of the various nutrients.

However, as all parents know, it can sometimes be a challenge to get your child to eat vegetables.

Fret not! There are many ways to encourage your child to take up the habit.

All you need is a little extra effort, which will go a long way in ensuring that your child gets all the important nutrients from vegetables.

### • Variety is tasty

Try out different varieties of vegetables to see if your child has any preferences.

Some children may like the crunchiness of carrots, cauliflower, broccoli and cucumbers, or the mushy texture of pumpkin, while some may prefer the sour taste of tomatoes.

As your child discovers different flavours and textures of vegetables, their palate will get used to how vegetables taste, and eventually, they will accept vegetables as part of their diet.

### • Get your child involved

Bring your child to the market when shopping for groceries and let them pick any vegetables they like.

When cooking, you can let your child help you by washing, peeling or cutting vegetables, depending on what is appropriate to their age.

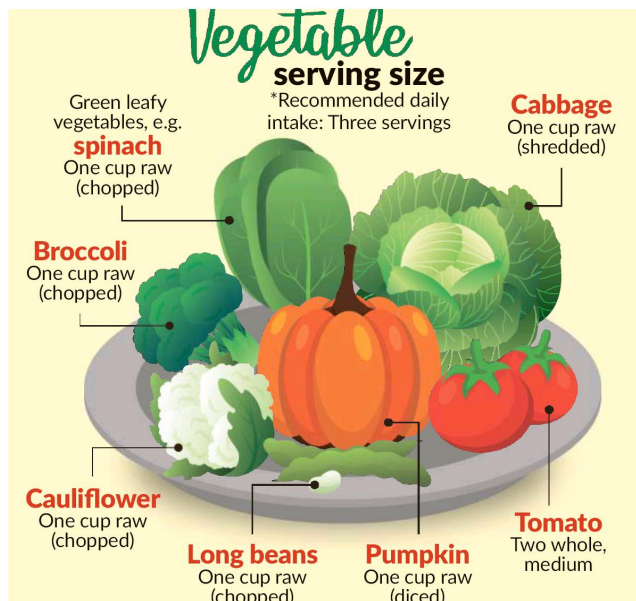
Your child will be more likely to try vegetables when they are involved in preparing the meal.

### • Be creative and fun

Vegetables are a versatile ingredient.

They can be cooked in many ways: stir-fried, steamed, boiled, roasted, made into soup or eaten raw.

They can also be cut in certain ways (e.g. by using animal-set cutter moulds) to make



them into shapes that your child likes.

Try combining several vegetables with different colours, flavours, shapes and textures in your meal.

A right combination will result in a meal that is not only delicious, but also appealing to the eyes.

### • Enhance the flavour

It is easier to entice kids into eating vegetables if you get the taste right.

You can use seasonings like spices, herbs and flavour enhancers such as white pepper, garlic, onion, lemongrass, thyme, parsley, vinegar and lemon, in your vegetable dishes.

Alternatively, you can also enhance a vegetable dish by adding some diced chicken, minced meat, or even *ikan bilis*, to stir-fried broccoli, cauliflower, lady's fingers, long beans or other vegetables.

Use your creativity to improve taste of vegetables to get children to eat them! Most of us are actually aware of all the

benefits of vegetables.

Nevertheless, our daily consumption of vegetables is still below recommended levels.

To address this issue, we need to start from the beginning, with our kids.

Use these tips to get your whole family, especially your kids, to eat more vegetables.

With a little effort and crafty cooking, getting your child to love vegetables is not an impossible mission.

Ng Kar Foo and Lee Zheng Yii are with the Malaysian Dietitians' Association (MDA). This article is contributed by Nutrition Month Malaysia 2019, an annual community nutrition education initiative jointly organised by the Nutrition Society of Malaysia, MDA and the Malaysian Association for the Study of Obesity. NMM will be organising a Food-Fit Fun Fair at IOI City Mall, Putrajaya, on April 17-21.