Behavior Change:

Eating Fruits & Vegetables

with Every Meal
Growing up, most parents tell their children to eat their fruits and vegetables. Eating fruits and vegetables daily has various health benefits. My health behavior that I chose was attempting to eat at least one fruit or vegetable with every meal. While doing my research, I learned many things about how beneficial this health behavior can be.

To begin, eating fruits and vegetables supplies the human body with essential vitamins and minerals that help the body function to the best of its ability. These vitamins and minerals include vitamin A, C, E, magnesium, zinc, phosphorus and folic acid. Additionally, fruits and vegetables provide the body with over 100 dietary compounds. Darker colored fruits specifically contain high amounts of these compounds. Some benefits of these vitamins and minerals are: a healthy immune system, reducing the chances of acne, and healthy growth and reproduction.

When consuming fruits and vegetables, there are specific ones that are beneficial for the skin. Being a college student, this is very important because acne is usually the result of stress and poor diet. However, certain fruits and vegetables are “skin friendly”, such as yellow and orange fruits and vegetables and dark green, leafy vegetables. These are just some examples, but there are many more. Another important component that fruits and vegetables have is their amount of dietary fiber. Dietary fiber is essentially indigestible parts of plants which pass unchanged through our stomach. Fiber keeps the digestive system functioning and healthy. Eating more fiber makes humans poop easier, and reduces the risk of constipation. (EBSCOhost, 1-7)

However, to demonstrate how important it is to eat real foods and vegetables as opposed to fruit juices and vegetable juices, a real, whole orange has more than 25 times the amount of fiber as a serving of orange juice. Processed fruit juices often contain very high amounts of added sugar. When attempting to lose weight, reducing the amount of sugar and fat you are consuming is essential and how much weight you will lose. Increasing fruits and vegetables can
help with losing weight, because they are low in calories but have high volume. For example, 5 ounces of cooked potato has many more calories than 5 ounces of cooked broccoli. (Duthie, ETHOS)

In addition, my research also concluded that the recommended daily amount of fruits and vegetables is 5 to 9 servings for adults. “Studies show that people who consume 5 or more servings of fruits and vegetables daily have about one-half the cancer risk of those who consume fewer than 2 servings.” (EBSCOhost, 13) Eating the recommended daily servings of fruits and vegetables is also linked to other chronic diseases such as heart disease and obesity. One of the main benefits of changing your behavior to eat more fruits and vegetables is the decreased risk of obesity. In America, the obesity rate is almost 40% of US adults. Obesity is caused by lack of physical activity, eating too many calories, and not eating the right foods. One way that eating more fruits and vegetables decreases the risk of obesity is the low number of calories that fruits and vegetables contain. If a person were to eat carrots and cucumbers as a snack as opposed to a bag of chips, they would be saving themselves about 200 calories. If a person also implemented these routines multiple times in their week, they would be saving hundreds of calories as a result. (EBSCOhost, 1-20)

Schools across America have been implementing changes in the lunch systems to increase the amount of servings that children eat of fruits and vegetables. For example, The USDA implemented in 2012 new weekly requirements for school lunches, including 2.5-5 cups of fruit, 3.75-5 cups of vegetables, and dark green and red/orange vegetables incorporated into meals. (Newman, 2) If children are exposed to different types of fruits and vegetables at a younger age, they will grow up being more willing to trying new ones. Additionally, children
consuming fruits and vegetables is essential in their growth process for their body and brain. (Schultz, Journal of School Nursing)

When deciding which health behavior I was going to choose, I knew that I wanted to select one that had to do with eating more fruits and vegetables. The reason that I chose this health behavior is because when I was 13 years old, I was overweight. I was always slightly overweight my entire life, but when I reached my teenage years I decided I wanted to change that. I began by eating more fruits and vegetables with my meals and substituting them for my snacks. About one year later, I had lost almost 15 pounds. Even though I was so young, changing small things in my diet resulted in losing the weight I carried with me for my entire life. Additionally, I chose this health behavior because in 2011, my grandfather passed away as a result of chronic heart disease. He developed heart disease because he was severely overweight his entire life, and seeing him struggle like this made me never want to be in that position.

The theory that I used to address my behavior change was the transtheoretical model. The reason I chose this is because when I began working out regularly, I used this exact approach. Now, four years later, I am still exercising regularly and meeting my goals. I believe that this theory works best because it addresses each stage in the process of changing a behavior and it shows the stages before and after the behavior change takes place. This theory has five stages: precontemplation, contemplation, preparation, action, and maintenance. For me, the stage of precontemplation were during the summer before the school year began. I knew I wanted to change something about my diet but I didn’t do anything about it yet. During contemplation, it was during the first week of school, when I thought about incorporating more fruits and vegetables into my diet. During the preparation stage, I made a list of fruits and vegetables that I enjoyed and planned out how I could incorporate them into my diet every single day. Next,
during the action stage, I made sure I was meeting my daily goals on how many fruits and vegetables I consumed. Now, I am in the maintenance stage, and I can gladly say that I have maintained my habit of eating fruits and vegetables with every single meal.

In the beginning of my behavior change, it was difficult because I was not used to eating a fruit or vegetable with every single meal. I was used to eating vegetables mainly with dinner, but not with breakfast or lunch. The strategies that I used to change my behavior were making a list of fruits and vegetables that I enjoyed, and the different ways I could incorporate them into my meals. For example, I began eating spinach in my omelettes in the morning for breakfast, and having a fruit like strawberries on the side throughout the day. There were various factors that helped me when I was changing my behavior, and one of the main motivators was the fact that my skin was clearing up significantly. I have struggled with acne my entire life, but increasing the amount of fruits and vegetables I consume drastically changed my skin. Another thing that helped me when I was changing my behavior was seeing that I was losing a little bit of weight. Over the course of this project, I lost 5 pounds and I have been able to keep it off.

The long-term benefits of changing this behavior for me are knowing that I am consuming such a high amount of vitamins and minerals, as opposed to the amount that I was consuming before. Another long-term benefit of changing this behavior is the results that my body has had. As said before, I lost some weight as a result of this project, and I could not be happier. Lastly, my digestive system has been working a lot better and I do not experience any forms of constipation, mostly due to the fact that I am eating increased amounts of fiber.

Over the course of this project, at the end of each day, I recorded the amount of fruit and vegetable servings I had. During the first week, I only had about 2 to 3 servings each day. However, towards the end of the term, my daily intake was about 4 to 6 servings. Something that
I realized while going through this process was implementing a behavior change like eating more fruits and vegetables becomes much easier as time goes on. Every day, I found it was easier to find ways to incorporate fruits and vegetables into my diet. It was just a matter of practicing the behavior and making it a habit.

On the other hand, during this process, I had some negative thoughts. These included asking myself questions such as: “Why am I doing this?”, and, “Is this really worth it?”. The reason that I was feeling these emotions was because I was not seeing any progress and I was not feeling any benefits. In my journal, on the 6th day of entries, I wrote “I feel like I have a lot more energy. I also think my face is clearing up.” This was the first time that I saw significant physical progress as a result of my behavior change, and this is what I needed to keep me going.

On the 12th day of my entries, I recorded, “So far I have lost 3 pounds.” I remember feeling happy that I had cut some weight, and I knew it was a result of eating more fruits and vegetables, because I was not changing my workout routine.

In my journal, I made the following chart to list what types of fruits and vegetables I could incorporate to every meal:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Breakfast</th>
<th>Lunch</th>
<th>Dinner</th>
<th>Other/Snacks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Smoothie; Side of fruit; Spinach with eggs; Yogurt &amp; fruit</td>
<td>Salad; Side salad; Side of fruit; Vegetables &amp; hummus</td>
<td>Salad; Side salad; Side of vegetables; Stir fry (protein &amp; vegetables)</td>
<td>Frozen fruit; Yogurt &amp; fruit; Smoothie</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Throughout the process of my behavior change, I learned many things about the benefits of fruits and vegetables and discovered new things about my body I had not known before. There are endless benefits to eating more fruits and vegetables, and this project allowed me to research those in depth.
References

Duthie, Susan J., et al. “Effect of Increasing Fruit and Vegetable Intake by Dietary Intervention on Nutritional Biomarkers and Attitudes to Dietary Change: A Randomised Trial.”


