

FOOD AND NUTRITION

Colorful Produce Is Indeed Nutritious, but Let's Not Leave White and Brown Foods Out of the Healthy Food Conversation



Christine Byrne • January 14, 2022



Photo: Getty Images/mikroman6

ou've probably heard the term "eating the rainbow" thrown around, and for good reason. The compounds that give plant foods their color also have unique health benefits, so eating a variety of colors means you're getting a wide range of nutrients. But I'm a registered dietitian, and this maxim—like so much "conventional wisdom" in the nutrition realm—drives me bonkers.

True, most Americans could benefit from eating more fruits and vegetables. Currently, only about 10 percent of adults get their five-a-day. But who says they have to be rainbow-hued? Not everything you eat—for health reasons or otherwise—needs to be vibrant. Solely embracing the nutritional value of colorful foods leads to white, beige, and brown foods getting overlooked (and even demonized) unnecessarily. In fact, it paints a narrow view of what healthy eating can look like. Here's why beige isn't boring, bland, or otherwise "bad" for your nutrition—and more importantly, how solely focusing on eating the rainbow both villainizes many cultural foods and whitewashes nutrition.

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White fruits and vegetables contain health-supporting compounds, too

Although colorful pigments seem to get all the health credit (the chlorophyll in deep green vegetables; the lycopene in bright red tomatoes; the anthocyanins in blueberries), white pigments offer unique health benefits, too. For instance:

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anti-inflammatory properties. Think of cauliflower, parsnips, white radishes, and jicama. One cup of cooked cauliflower will get you more than halfway to your daily vitamin C goal, and one cup of raw parsnips contains nearly one-fourth of the folate that most adults need in a day.



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Even starchy white vegetables, which are sometimes villainized, are nutrient rich. "White potatoes are loaded with the fiber and potassium that we need daily," says registered dietitian Elizabeth Barnes, MS, RD, owner of Weight Neutral Wellness. Fiber, found in all plant-based foods, helps keep your digestive system moving, lowers your risk of high blood

pressure and high cholesterol, and can even support your immune system by feeding probiotic bacteria in your gut. And potassium, also found in bananas, is crucial for nerve and muscle function and heart health.

...and they're not the only ones

Although white fruits and vegetables don't often take center stage in the healthy eating conversation, most people know they're nutritious. After all, they're still fruits and vegetables. Other plant-based white foods, like nuts and seeds, are widely hailed by wellness devotees as well.

The real issue with the “eat the rainbow” ethos is that it excludes starchier white and brown foods: rice, bread, tortillas, grits, hominy, and other carbs that many people mistakenly believe shouldn't be staples in a healthy diet. Madalyn Vasquez, MS, RD, CDCES, a dietitian and diabetes educator, explains that starchy white foods play an important role in health. “Carbohydrates are our body's preferred source of energy and provide other nutrients such as fiber, vitamins, and minerals,” she says. All carbs, whether they come from a sweet potato or a flour tortilla, provide the body with important energy and nutrients.

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Carbs such as beans, whole grains, and starchy vegetables are *also* high in fiber. That fiber aids digestion, helps prevent constipation, and can reduce your risk of certain chronic diseases, Vasquez says. But processed carbs like cereal and packaged bread products aren't evil. They're an energy source, and they're often fortified with certain essential vitamins and minerals that many people might be deficient in otherwise. Plus, we usually eat these foods alongside other things as part of a meal—bread in a sandwich, rice with veggies and meat, cereal with fruit and milk, and so on—which means we're getting a variety of nutrients overall.

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Creamy, cheesy white foods aren't inherently bad, either. Sure, a steady diet of crème brûlée and queso blanco with tortilla chips isn't nutritionally sound. But eating these things sometimes, as part of a varied overall diet, is just fine. They're often a great source of calcium, which is essential for healthy bones, as well as heart, nerve, and muscle function. And some creamy foods, like yogurt and skyr, are extremely nutritious, being high in protein, vitamin, minerals, and health-supporting probiotic bacteria.

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Demonizing white foods isn't just a bad take on nutrition science—it's also culturally insensitive

Dalina Soto, MA, RD, LDN, dietitian and owner of Your Latina Nutritionist, says that many of her Latinx clients come to her believing that they need to stop eating rice, beans, tortillas, yuca, and other cultural staples to be healthy. Some nutrition professionals and other healthcare providers, she says, write off these traditional Latinx staples like rice, plantains, tostones, and tortillas as too carb-heavy, particularly for people with type 2 diabetes. They recommend restricting or eliminating them, instead of taking the time to explain how our bodies process carbohydrates and ways to include these things as part of a healthy diet. Sometimes, Soto says, this has to do with the language barrier: An English-speaking provider can't explain the nuances of healthy eating to a Spanish-speaking patient. Without a translator in the room, the only way to get information across might be to say something oversimplified like, "avoid white foods," or with a handout that lists white foods as ones to avoid.

This stereotype demonizes foods that have not only been part of Latinx cultures for centuries, but are also inexpensive and quick to prepare. (As opposed to, say, a grain bowl with six-plus different veggies, vegan meat, and homemade dressing.) And this has consequences. Soto shares that some people give up on being healthy: "They feel like, what is the point if they can't enjoy familiar foods?"

Instead of giving blanket advice that's doomed to fail, Soto takes a much more individualized approach. "Everybody is so different," she says. "Even if I'm working with someone that has type 2 diabetes, I talk to them about what actually happens when they eat these high-carb foods." (And, she notes, not everyone's blood sugar levels react to all carbs in the same way, so an individualized approach really is key.) She talks about ways to keep blood sugar steady and get adequate nutrition without avoiding staple foods completely, like adding carbs, protein, and vegetables alongside high-carb white and beige foods.

Andrew Akhaphong, MS, RD, LD, a registered dietitian for Mackenthun's grocery stores, says that in his family's Laotian culture, which is heavily influenced by Theravada Buddhism, meals are traditionally built around flavor balance—sweet, spicy, sour, and umami—versus nutrition or aesthetics. "It is believed [in Buddhism that] having a balance of these restores the 'hot and cold forces,'" he explains. While colorful vegetables and herbs are abundant in Laotian cuisine, foods like rice and noodles are important as well. And in this context, white foods actually provide nutritional balance.

Making good nutrition more accessible means including white and brown foods

Soto, who rarely shares food pictures with her 62,000-plus Instagram followers, thinks that social media fuels the fire of people believing that healthy eating must look a certain way. "There's all of these reds and greens and purples," she says. "Everything is so freaking colorful, and the photography makes it look amazing." Often, this can also mean intimidating and inaccessible.

Indeed, colorful foods are visually vibrant, whereas white and brown ones don't exactly pop off your feed—especially when they have to compete with cerulean spirulina, pumpkin spice lattes, and bright purple açai bowls. "We tell you to eat the rainbow because a lot of these colors have different vitamins and nutrients in them," Soto says. "But you don't need to toss something green into everything you eat." It's okay if some meals and snacks lack color, because less vibrant foods deliver nutrients as well.

Aesthetics just aren't a great standard against which to measure nutrition. In fact, a diet of only kale salads and smoothie bowls isn't healthy at all. As someone who helps adults overcome disordered eating behaviors, I see all too often that what starts as an innocent enough resolution to "prioritize colorful foods" can quickly morph into a decidedly unhealthy obsession with eating huge quantities of fruits and vegetables and little else.

There's no doubt that eating colorful produce supports good health, but that's no reason to exclude other foods from the conversation. White, beige, and brown foods—from cauliflower and chickpeas to rice, plantains, lentils, yams, tofu, and so much more—all have a place in a healthy diet. They're nutritious and energizing in their own right, and they're staples in traditional cuisines that are deeply meaningful in ways that transcend their vitamin-and-mineral makeup. Instead of trying to avoid these less colorful foods, think of them as another shade of your healthy eating rainbow, with their own unique texture, flavor, and nutritional benefits.

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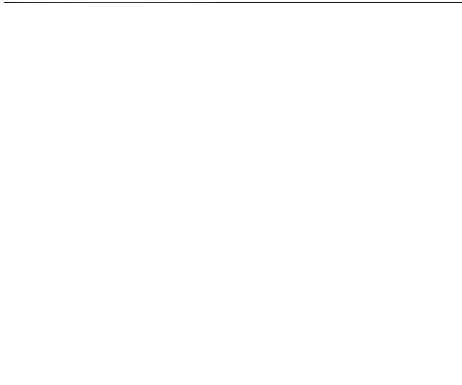
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