Have Some More Green

Yes, I know we’re about to celebrate Mother’s Day, and St. Patrick’s is past. But still, getting some greens is a good idea, to keep you and Mom around and healthy for lots more years to come. There have been lots of recent reports - Low Fat Diet Doesn’t Work, Vitamin Supplements Don’t Work, High Protein Diets Don’t Work, etc. But none of them have suggested that a diet rich in fruits and vegetables is won’t work! On the contrary, what keeps showing up over and over is that idea that eating whole fruits, whole vegetables and whole grains is much better for us than trying to isolate the “active ingredient” or eat just the “beneficial” parts.

We can measure the carbohydrates, the fat and the protein in a vegetable. We can measure the vitamins and the minerals. But there are hundreds or thousands of other ingredients. We might be able to measure some of them, and name a few more of them. But there are many, many other that we don’t know what they do. We’re finding out that many of them work hard at protecting us from certain cancers. Some seem to help lower our blood pressure, or reduce our cholesterol levels. And some do much more than we’ve been giving them credit for.

Take folate as an example. It’s found naturally in spinach and leafy dark green vegetables, dry beans, orange juice and some other fruits. For years we thought it was mainly important for pregnant women. If they don’t get enough folate, the babies were much more likely to be born with very serious birth defects. Many babies died. So now folate is added to bread and cereals, to protect the moms and babies.
But, surprise, more folate in our blood decreases our risk of some kinds of strokes! More folate lowers our risk of heart and artery disease. Folate might be involved in preventing some cancers.

Now, the most recent disease to be related to folate levels is Alzheimer’s Disease. This was a really long study - they followed seniors for 14 years. They started with people who were over 60. Everyone was asked to report on what vitamins and supplements they were taking. They were asked to keep track of everything they ate for a week at a time. The doctors kept track of who got Alzheimer’s Disease during the 14 years of the study.

At the end, the only vitamin or mineral that was linked to getting the disease was folate. People who got at least the recommended amount, whether they ate it in food or took supplements, were less than half as likely to get Alzheimer’s. The less folate in the diet, the higher the chances of getting Alzheimer’s.

How much is enough? The recommended amount for adults is 400 mcg a day. (Unless you’re pregnant, then you need 600 mcg.) We actually absorb more from supplements than we do from food. But with a pill, you only get the folate, not the other healthy things in fruits or vegetables. Just don’t go over 1,000 mcg a day. That’s the maximum.

The 2005 Dietary Guidelines for Americans divided vegetables into 5 groups and recommended that we get some from each. Their first group is Dark Leafy Greens, and these are the best sources of folate. Collards, turnip and mustard greens are all good sources, but the best is spinach. Half a cup of cooked spinach gives you 130 mcg of folate. Steam it so you don’t lose a lot in boiling water.

Here’s an easy, healthy recipe for a Mother’s Day brunch, or a light supper any
night of the year. Lots of flavor, lovely color, reduced fat and plenty of protein, plus
spinach to keep your mind sharp to enjoy it!

Crustless Spinach Quiche

1 Tbsp fine, dry bread crumbs  2 tsp olive oil
2 medium onions, chopped (1 ½ C)  1 clove garlic, minced
1 small red bell pepper, seeded, chopped (1 C)  8 C spinach, rinsed, dried
3 eggs - Or use egg substitute for both of these  1 C reduced fat ricotta cheese
3 egg whites  ½ C grated Parmesan cheese
Salt, pepper, crushed red pepper to taste

Preheat oven to 350º F. Spray a 9 inch deep-dish pie pan with cooking spray. Sprinkle
bread crumbs and tilt to coat evenly.

Heat oil in skillet to medium-high. Add onions, pepper and garlic, saute until softened,
about 3 minutes. Add spinach gradually, cook until wilted. Let cool slightly. Beat eggs
and egg whites (or egg substitute) with ricotta until smooth. Add Parmesan, seasoning
and vegetables. Spread evenly pie dish. Bake 35 to 45 minutes, until set in center. Let
stand 5 minutes to solidify before serving. Serves 6.