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### Cooking Makes It Better

Now that we've survived the scare, don't think that you have to go back to eating mostly raw spinach. Cooked vegetables are easier to eat for many people. They're more convenient, and often less expensive. But they also have great nutritional value. In fact, we get *more* of some nutrients from cooked fruits and vegetables, including spinach, than we do from the raw forms.

Beta carotene is the form of vitamin A most commonly found in many plants. In pure form vitamin A looks like bright orange sugar or salt crystals. It's found in most fruits and vegetables that are either dark orange or dark green on the inside. The greens include all the dark leafy ones like spinach and collards as well as broccoli. The oranges include winter squash, cantaloupe, apricots and sweet potatoes. And red tomatoes manage to sneak into the list too, even though we can't see the orange in them.

In our bodies beta carotene gets converted into the active forms of vitamin A that allow us to see and that provide antioxidant activity to protect us from other diseases. We absorb significantly more beta carotene from cooked tomatoes than we do from the raw ones in our salads. We get lots more from canned carrots or carrots cooked in stew than we do from crunching on raw ones.

That's not to say that we shouldn't eat raw tomatoes, carrots or spinach. The raw forms have vitamin C, which is also an antioxidant. But vitamin C is a wimp when it comes to heat. Heat destroys most of it. But heating frees the carotene so that we can absorb it.

Heating also frees lycopene. That's the red pigment in tomatoes, guavas and watermelon. It protects us from loss of vision as we age, and seems to have some cancer protection value as well.

Cooking does not destroy protein or fiber. It makes protein easier to chew and digest. If you cook vegetables in lots of water you might lose some minerals in the water. But if you steam them or microwave them with just a couple spoonfuls of water there won't be any lost minerals either. Cooking does kill microorganisms, so if you're still concerned about vegetable safety, cook them. You'll still get all your nutrients.

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