

### King of the Cruciferous: Broccoli

By Stephanie Polizzi, MPH, RDN

If you are trying to eat healthier, one of the first foods to add to your family's plate is broccoli. Broccoli is a member of the cruciferous family which is most promising for nutrients that may slow, delay or prevent many types of cancers.



More than 300 studies have demonstrated that cruciferous vegetables, and especially broccoli, contain sulforaphane, a compound known to reduce inflammation, prevent oxidative stress and help clear toxins from the body, all of which reduce risk for cancer. But this "King of the Cruciferous" has many other disease-fighting nutrients.

Antioxidants in broccoli, like vitamin C, beta carotene and other carotenoids, support skin and eye health. Folate protects against birth defects as well as breast cancer. You may be surprised to learn that broccoli contains the essential omega-3 fat, ALA, which protects against heart disease. Most people are unaware that broccoli contains both calcium and vitamin K which support bone health. And high fiber can prevent constipation, reduce chronic inflammation, lower cholesterol and improve insulin sensitivity. High in nutrients and low in calories, broccoli has earned its title as "King of the Cruciferous."

When shopping for broccoli select compact, dark green heads or florets, with no yellowing. You may also find purple varieties of broccoli. Store, unwashed, in perforated plastic bags, in the vegetable crisper area of the refrigerator. Use within a few days. You may also choose frozen broccoli without added sauces or flavorings.

To prepare, wash and cut florets and stems (do not discard these) into smaller pieces. Use raw for veggie trays with dip or hummus, or toss into salads. Try pureeing raw broccoli for dips, or pesto for pasta. When cooking, steaming is preferred over boiling to retain nutrients. This can be done on the stove top with a steaming basket, or in the microwave (3-4 minutes). Do not overcook broccoli as nutrients are destroyed. Then toss with pasta, into stir fry or puree into tomato sauces. You can even toss raw or slightly steamed broccoli onto pizzas or in wraps.

If you or your kids aren't sure you like broccoli, try growing your own. Broccoli loves the cooler weather so it is a perfect crop for container gardens in our region. You'll find the taste of home-grown broccoli is sweet and delicious, and your family will love it.

However you choose to use broccoli, try to consume this powerhouse of nutrients at least twice per week. One serving is only ½ cup cooked which means you double your nutrients when you consume an average-sized portion of 1 cup. Kids love to eat these tiny "trees" with hummus in their lunch boxes and guests will enjoy how broccoli makes for easy finger food with dips or sauces.