

Consuming Thoughts
by
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Are you having trouble finding nutritious snacks for your children to eat? Have you ever wondered about the nutritional benefits of prepackaged veggies compared to fresh?

Don't be misled into thinking that ready-to-cook (or eat) vegetables are nutritionally superior. They should be thought of in the same category as frozen and canned products. All such processed foods, from a practical standpoint, are equally good for you.

Somewhere along the line people have gotten the idea that unless a fruit or vegetable is fresh it's completely worthless. That's just not so according to nutritionists. Pre-cut and bagged vegetables and those that have been frozen and even canned have, in the larger scheme of things, about the same nutritional value.

Consumers tend to think that there's some subtle hierarchy of "freshness" ranging in value from, say, a head of broccoli sitting on ice in the produce section (high in nutrients) to canned peas on the shelf (having none). To counter this idea, a study reported by the Institute of Food Technologists shows that by the

time you stick the product in your mouth, the nutrient content is about the same regardless of whether it was fresh, frozen, or canned, because in the end, all of these require different amounts of further processing.

With the canned peas, for example, they need only be barely heated, while frozen peas require a bit more. Fresh peas, however, must be shelled, rinsed, and cooked considerably longer. So at some point along the line, all three "versions" have been subjected to about the same amount of heat to make them edible.

In addition, commercial processors typically pick right from the field and preserve the vegetables within hours, allowing less nutrient loss than occurs in that head of broccoli that's been trucked across the country, left to sit in the store for a day or two, taken home, stored even longer, and then overcooked.

The popularity of pre-cut vegetables packaged in plastic bags is definitely on the rise. Cost notwithstanding, they are very appealing to busy, health-conscious shoppers who'd like to eat more fresh fruits and vegetables but have less and less time to prepare them.

Remember - pre-cut vegetables packaged in plastic bags are a "processed" food. First, the vegetables are cut, then typically washed in a chlorine solution to kill harmful bacteria, and rinsed in plain water. They're placed in plastic bags that use a technology called "modified atmosphere packaging" to slow down nutrient loss and spoilage. How this works is that the plastic films used in the packages determine the amount of oxygen and carbon dioxide that can move in and out of the bag. Controlling this "respiration" (a natural occurrence that continues even after vegetables have been harvested) maintains nutrient quality significantly longer than if the same product sat out in the open air.

For this reason it's important to note the sell-by date on pre-cut vegetable products and to use them up promptly once the bag has been opened. When the "modified atmosphere" is torn, deterioration accelerates. Be sure the store displays bagged products in refrigerated cases, similar to those used for chilled orange juice, and keep them cold at home as well, as cold temperature is critical to product quality.

The important thing to remember is that the message reminding consumers to eat "Five a Day for Better Health" doesn't mean you have to eat garden fresh produce every day.

The form of those five servings really isn't that important. What counts is that you get them from your plate and into your mouth.

'You Gave Them Life

(Continued from Page B2)

at an all-time high, "There are still too many children who have not had the state required immunizations," said Norine Mountcastle, Pennsylvania Department of Health immunization coordinator for the southeast district of Pennsylvania. "To be informed that a child has died from complications of a vaccine preventable disease is inexcusable."

Continual research is done to eliminate serious illnesses. One of the newer vaccines is called Hib, which stands for Haemophilus influenza type b, a serious disease caused by a bacteria that usually strikes children under 5 years old.

Before Hib vaccine, Hib disease was the leading cause of bacterial meningitis among children. About 20,000 children under 5 years old got severe Hib disease and about 1,000 died annually in the U.S.

Meningitis is an infection of the brain and spinal cord coverings, which can cause lasting brain damage and deafness. Hib disease can also cause pneumonia; severe swelling in the throat, making it hard to breathe; infections of the blood, joints, bones, and covering of the heart; and death.

Mountcastle said that dosages of the Hib vaccine should be given to children at 2, 4, 6, and 12-15 months of age.

Parents should not let the cost of immunization stand in the way. It costs only \$5 per child at

immunizations sites through the state Department of Health. To those in need, free vaccines are also available through state health centers. Child Protect requires hospitals and health departments to provide free immunizations to underinsured or noninsured children.

"We never turn anyone away," Zuck said.

Parents should keep a record of their child's immunizations. These are needed for school entrance, college, and for jobs if they travel outside the country.

"The future health of children depends on decisions made now," Mountcastle said of the continual effort to have children immunized.

The Lancaster County Immunization Coalition is a community-based group that focuses on improving immunization rates of children and adults through community education and monitoring.

The Lancaster County Coalition meets monthly and wants new members. Meetings are conducted the first Wednesday of each month from 8 a.m. to 9:30 a.m. at the Lancaster General Health Campus Wellness Center, Harrisburg Pike, Lancaster.

For more information on the Coalition, call Michelle Hargaves at (717) 290-3144.

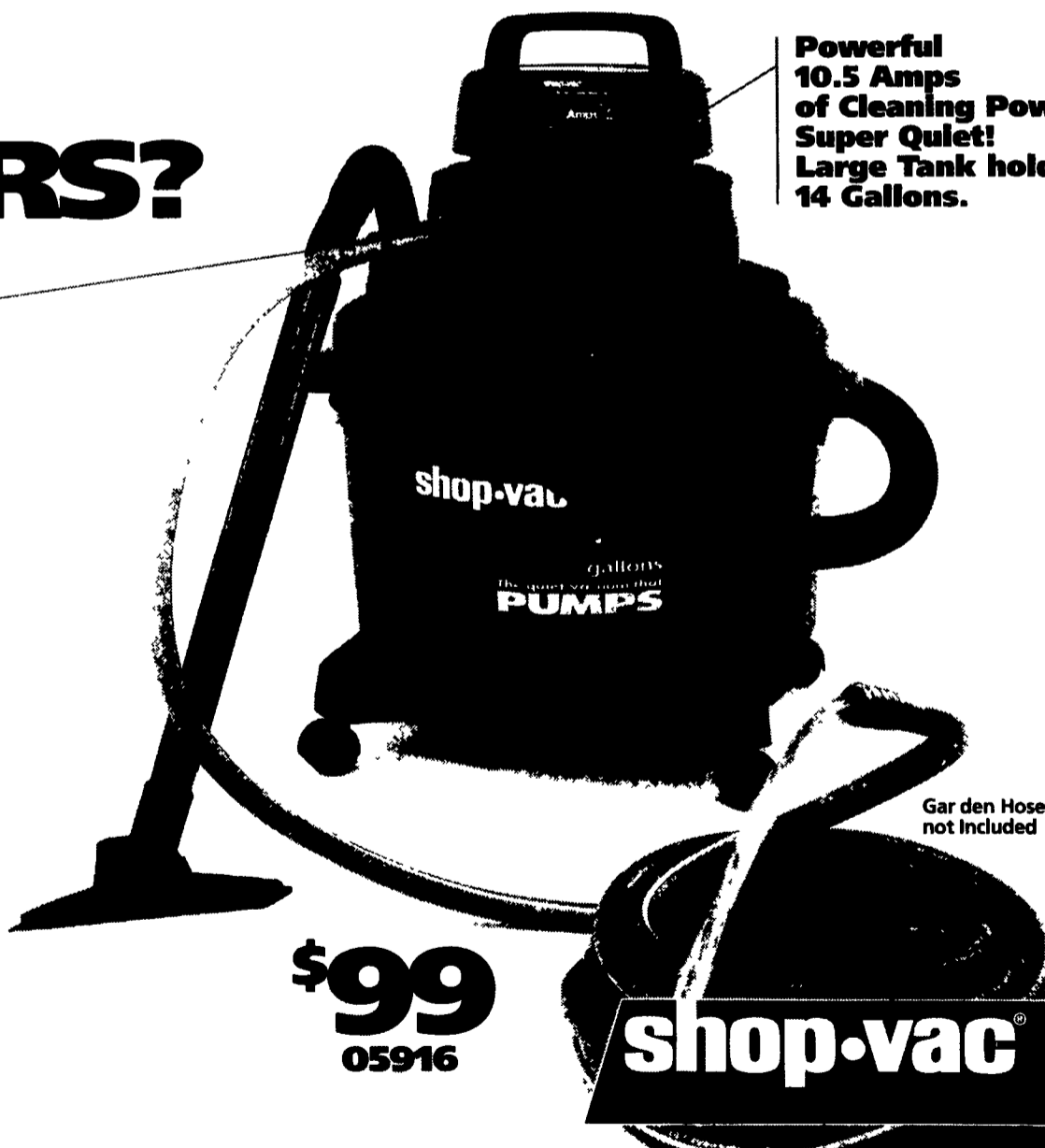
For more information about immunizations, call your doctor or local state health center or call 1-800-986-KIDS.

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