Ask an expert: How do you preserve nutrients in fruits and vegetables — a NetWellness column
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Question: I have a baby who is just starting to eat solid foods. I am concerned that the way I prepare her food maintains the most nutrients. Is there any nutritional difference in vegetables and fruits when I bake instead of steaming them? Will I lose nutrients if I mash cooked foods and refrigerate them for use the next day? I don't want to give any food to my baby that has lost its nutrients.

Answer: It is wonderful that you are trying to give your baby the best nutrition you can. I hope the following information helps you out.

The method of food preparation and storage/shelf life can affect nutrient content of all foods. Some nutrients are destroyed by exposure to acidic or alkaline environments, oxygen exposure (air), ultraviolet light, and heating (cooking methods).

Baking vs. steaming

It is difficult to say whether baking or steaming will retain the most nutrients. Nutritional value after cooking would vary depending on:

- Length of time
- Temperature
- Food item
**Food consistency**

In general, both baking and steaming methods of food preparation are preferred over frying or boiling. Microwave cooking will also help retain nutrients.

**Food storage**

To prevent nutrient losses in your baby's food, it is important to store food properly at recommended safe temperatures and keep them in air-tight, well sealed/clean containers.

If you prepare the baby's food a day ahead of time, label the containers with the date to assure that you are using it within a short time frame (within 2-3 days).

Although it doesn’t reduce the nutritional value, mashing food will increase the surface area for bacteria to grow on, and could increase the risk of food poisoning.

Be sure to wash your hands before handling these foods, use clean utensils and surfaces, then refrigerate the food quickly. If foods sit at room temperature over 2 hours, throw it out.