

Raw Food, Living Food **Wendy Warner, MD, ABIHM**

Many people are willing and even eager to change how they eat in order to improve their health. Of the many choices that could be made to achieve this, raw food diets are an option. A true “raw foodist” eats at least 75 % of their food uncooked. This manner of eating can be considered controversial, as it has both pros and cons.

Of course, most of us eat at least a portion of our food uncooked. Salads, juice, simple fruit and nibbling on veggies are all examples. Raw foodists, however, go further: they strive to eat foods that have not been heated above 110 degrees, for above this temperature, enzymes in the food get damaged and do not function. They believe that it is the activity of these enzymes that aid in digestion and assimilation of nutrients and that without them, our health suffers. In order to achieve a balanced diet, they soak and sprout grains, seeds and nuts and use dehydrators to form foods with crunch. By definition, this is a vegetarian (often vegan) diet. Some raw foodists will include cheeses made from raw milk as well as raw eggs, but not all do. Most include a wide variety of sea vegetables but don’t drink coffee, alcohol or tea. Most raw foodists describe feeling lighter, healthier and with fewer illnesses.

So is this a smart way to eat? Does cooking damage the nutrients in food? It all depends.

I am not in favor of eating the majority of your foods raw. First of all, there are some nutrients such as lycopene and betacarotene that are better absorbed from cooked foods than raw foods. Heat also increases the beneficial compounds we obtain from onions and garlic. As with any plant-based diet, adequate amounts of Vitamin B12 are difficult to obtain and often must be supplemented. Protein, however, is NOT a problem, as most vegetables have as much or more protein as animal foods. The difference is that in plants, not all amino acids are found in each food, so a wide variety of foods need to be consumed on a regular basis to stay in balance.

Each food should be considered as an individual and prepared accordingly. If you will be cooking food, using the appropriate type of heat is important---steaming is almost always a better choice than boiling or microwaving, but care should be taken in how much time the food is steamed. (Spinach takes a minute; kale takes about 5 minutes). Overcooking any food will rob it of nutrients.

Another note of importance to all of us is that digestion starts in the mouth---chewing our food well starts to break it down and stimulates chemicals that both act on the food in the mouth and further stimulate chemicals in the stomach and small intestine. Many of us eat too rapidly for this to really occur efficiently; in the case of raw foods, we are even more dependent on chewing to assimilate the nutrients. So slow down and notice what you’re doing!

Many raw foodists make “mock” versions of cooked foods. Here’s one from Alissa Cohen that is quick, easy and tasty. Try it on crackers, rolled into a lettuce leaf or over salad:

Mock Salmon Pate

2 cups walnuts
2 stalks celery
1 large red bell pepper

1 large scallion
1/2 -1 tsp sea salt

Combine all ingredients in a food processor and blend until smooth. (You may want to add slightly more celery or scallion, also some black pepper).