Keep healthy and eat healthy

This week, Men’s Sheds partners with the HSE to highlight links between your eating habits and wellbeing.

Throughout Ireland, men’s sheds are discovering the joy and satisfaction of growing their own fruits and vegetables. The polytunnel, orchard and raised bed have joined the workshop and kitchen as indispensable parts of many sheds. But it’s when the produce hits the table that the benefits really kick in.

Fruit and vegetables are low in calories and high in nutrients, and can even help reduce your risk of developing heart disease, stroke and certain cancers.

But, for all the bounty sprouting from the soil of Irish sheds, Irish men remain much less likely to eat fruit and vegetables than Irish women. It is recommended that adults consume five to seven portions of fruit and vegetables each day, but a recent survey on the health habits of Irish people found that only one in every five Irish men eats this recommended minimum daily amount. By contrast, one third of women in Ireland managed to meet the recommended minimum amount.

So why are men lagging behind? Researchers who examined this issue found that men just don’t believe as strongly as women that eating fruit and vegetables is important to maintaining health and wellbeing. Other reasons for shying away from fruit and vegetables include cost, access, inconvenience to prepare, potential waste and sheer shelf life.

Margaret O’Neill, national dietetic adviser with the HSE says: “The truth is that fruit and vegetables, packed with nutrients, fibre and complex bioactive compounds, really are an important part of maintaining your health. Eating more of them has long been associated with a lower risk of heart disease, stroke, some cancers as well as boosting gut health.”

Many people find creating a habit is key when trying to eat more fruit and vegetables. Margaret suggests “always having a piece of fruit at breakfast each morning, after dinner, or in the car”.

Just as we can develop bad or unhelpful habits around diet and exercise, we can also cultivate healthier habits to put in their place. The more having a piece of fruit or a portion of vegetables becomes a regular part of your daily routine, the less likely you are to skip it or to opt for a less healthy alternative.

Men’s sheds are helping men see fruit and vegetables in a different, more inviting light. Many sheds have partnered with their local HSE Health promotion service to deliver simple, practical nutrition and cooking classes.

George Finglas, PRO of Priorywood and District Men’s Shed, completed a six-week nutrition and cooking programme in January/February 2015. George said: “When we were doing the course, many of the men became more aware of the portion sizes of their meals.

“One of the biggest changes has been that, since we did the course, we introduced fruit as an alternative to the usual biscuits and cake at tea break. This has proved very popular and members often complain if there is no fruit available.”

For more information about healthy eating, visit www.hse.ie/healthyeating or www.safefood.eu.

If your shed is interested in running a nutrition and cooking programme, please contact Eidel Byrne, Irish Men’s Sheds Association health and wellbeing coordinator, at edel@menssheds.ie or on 01-891 6150.

For more information on the Irish Men’s Sheds Association’s Sheds for Life health and wellbeing initiative, please visit www.menssheds.ie/shedsforlife and www.musclehealth.ie.