

WHAT WE EAT PROFOUNDLY AFFECTS OUR WELL-BEING AND LONGEVITY...

Eating a diet with more good plant foods and less (or no) meat and other animal foods is good for your health. It is clear that people who base their diets on plant foods have lower risk for certain conditions, including heart disease, hypertension, some types of cancer, diabetes, obesity, gallstones, and kidney stones. Although we are a long way from being able to define the single “optimal” eating plan, it is clear that the more your diet is based on plant foods, the better.

Avoid the bad stuff...

When you eat plant foods instead of animal foods, you tend to eat less total fat and much less saturated fat, and you completely remove cholesterol. This reduces the risk of heart disease, obesity, and perhaps cancer. The more moderate (but adequate) protein intake from plant foods can also be a benefit. The excess protein consumption (especially animal protein) typical of Western diets may raise blood cholesterol levels, increase risk of kidney damage in people who are prone to kidney problems, and reduce bone health.

... eat more of the good stuff

By eating more plant foods, you will consume more antioxidants (including certain vitamins, and non-nutrient components), protecting cells from the damage caused by free radicals. Antioxidants protect against heart disease, cancer, and a number of other chronic conditions. By increasing your consumption of fiber (which is found only in plant foods) you can dramatically reduce colon cancer risk, and possibly protect against heart disease and diabetes. You will also get more phytochemicals (plant chemicals that have important biological properties that promote health) and many vitamins that are found primarily in plant foods. This includes the important B vitamin folate, which protects against heart disease by reducing levels

of homocysteine in the blood. Other vitamins that are particularly abundant in a plant-food diet include vitamins C and E and the carotenoid family (which includes beta-carotene, the precursor to vitamin A).

... and get huge health benefits compared to a standard Western diet



Atherosclerosis and Heart Disease

Atherosclerosis is the build up of fatty deposits in the arteries, which can impede blood flow, leading to heart attack, kidney failure, stroke, and impotence. Diets low in saturated fat and cholesterol and high in antioxidants and fiber reduce the risk for atherosclerosis. There is some evidence that high animal protein intake, too much iron, and low levels of folate -- all typical of Western meat-centered diets -- raise risk.

Cancer

Plant-based diets seem to reduce risk for certain types of cancer, probably due to more fiber, less animal fat, and more antioxidants and phytochemicals. There is a clear reduction in colon cancer, the second most common fatal cancer in the United States.

Hypertension

Without understanding quite why, we know that vegetarians have lower blood pressure than others. This reduces the risk of heart attacks, strokes, and other diseases.

Kidney Diseases

Lower protein intake reduces the burden on the kidneys, and lower cholesterol levels may also protect against kidney failure. People who eat no animal foods are at lower risk for kidney stones than meat-eaters.

Improving your Plant-Based diet

Many commentators, ranging from health professionals to well-meaning friends, tend to worry about the special concerns of removing animal foods from your diet. Given the preceding information, this is rather ironic - people would be much better off worrying about the particular problems from their meat-centered diets! But no matter how you choose to eat, you need to pay some attention to food choices. Just as some meat-centered diets are healthier than others, there are a few things to keep in mind to make sure that your plant-based diet is the extremely healthy choice it should be.

Calcium

Humans evolved in a world where the common natural foods contained a lot of calcium. Today, getting the 1000 mg that is the most recently recommended intake takes some effort. There is some reason to believe that the lower protein intake from a meat-free diet reduces calcium demands, but we cannot be sure of how much this helps, so it is wise to meet recommended intakes. Many plant foods are good sources of well-absorbed calcium, including many leafy green vegetables, blackstrap molasses, and some nuts and beans. Other excellent sources include fortified foods like calcium-fortified orange juice, calcium-fortified soymilk and rice milk, and calcium-set tofu.

Vitamin B12

The short story is this: Experts agree that strict vegetarians (those who eat no animal foods) need to supplement their diet with vitamin B12. This does

not suggest that there is anything wrong with a plant-based diet, but just that there are small efforts that must be made to capture the huge health benefits of avoiding animal foods.

Beneficial fats

Although most Western diets suffer from too much fat, and especially too much animal fat, there is reason to believe that some plant fats have health benefits. For example, monounsaturated fats, prevalent in nuts, avocados, olive oil, and canola oil, appear to protect against heart disease and perhaps certain types of cancer. Somewhat more complicated are the omega-3 essential fatty acids. A plant-based diet may have little of these or have too low a ratio of omega-3 to omega-6 fatty acids (although the same is true of meat-centered diets). This can be remedied by eating good sources of the omega-3 fats, which are flaxseeds, flaxseed oil, full-fat soy products, walnuts, and canola oil. At the same time, it is helpful to reduce intake of omega-6 fats by eating less corn, safflower, and sunflower oil and fewer sources of trans-fats.

Other nutrients

Most everyone in our society could probably benefit from trying to get enough zinc. Anyone who does not get enough sunlight on their skin needs to take a vitamin D supplement, which you can find in fortified foods, including soy milk and cereals.

But what about getting enough protein?

Almost all plant foods (except for fruits and oils) contain adequate amounts of protein and many common vegetarian foods, such as grains, legumes, seeds, and nuts, are quite high in protein. No diet that contains enough energy (calories) will be short of protein unless it is totally dominated by fruit or junk food. Even athletes will have no problem if they are eating enough food.

Join EarthSave To Stay Informed and To Educate Others

EarthSave's greatly needed programs are actively helping people reclaim their health and restore our planet. By joining EarthSave, you learn how your food choices protect and improve your quality of life, and you become an active player in healing the environment. For membership or information, call (800) 362-3648.

EarthSave educates, inspires and empowers people to shift toward a diet centered around fruits, vegetables, grains and legumes - food choices that are healthy for people and the planet.

This information is condensed from *The Vegetarian Way* and *A Dieticians Guide to Vegetarian Diets*, both by Virginia Messina, RD and Mark Messina, PhD. Other useful references are *Vegan Nutrition* by Gill Langley, *Becoming Vegetarian* by Vesanto Melina, Brenda Davis, and Victoria Harris, and *Simply Vegan* by Debra Wasserman and Reed Mangels. The information in this pamphlet is limited by space and is based on healthy adults and older children. Please consult EarthSave International, as well as more thorough references or a vegetarian-friendly dietitian, for complete advice.



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