Your Heart Loves a Plant-based Diet

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Did you know that eating a plant-based diet reduces your risk of heart disease, America's number one killer?

A vegan for the last eight years, Sabine Gempel, DPT, PT, sees the benefits of plant-based eating in her own health and in her patients. Dr. Gempel is a board-certified cardiovascular and pulmonary specialist and a physical therapist at the University of Miami Health System's Cardiopulmonary Rehabilitation Program. She recalls a 33-year-old patient who started rehabilitation because of heart failure. After he began eating vegan six days a week, he lost 30 pounds, his heart function dramatically improved, and he eliminated some of his medications. Other patients report having more mental clarity. Many reverse their diabetes. "That's important since diabetes increases the risk of cardiovascular disease," Dr. Gempel says, adding, "Now is the time to take control of your health since cardiac disease can increase your risk of negative COVID-19 outcomes. Plant-based diets can also decrease other risk factors (obesity, diabetes) associated with complications from COVID-19."

Patients who avoid animal protein in the few weeks leading up to a lipid profile blood test typically see positive changes in their test scores, she says.

Despite these benefits, many people are reluctant to change. "People have preconceived notions about vegan and vegetarian foods. One of the most common misconceptions I hear from patients is they think they won't get enough protein. The average American consumes far too much protein and does not get enough of the fiber, vitamins, and beneficial phytochemicals found in plants," Dr. Gempel explains.
If you're still hesitant, consider how your body benefits when you eat less meat:

- Easier to maintain a healthy weight
- Decreased blood pressure
- Improved cholesterol, inflammatory markers, and blood glucose levels
- Better functioning of the cells lining the blood vessels

"I encourage patients to focus on fiber more than protein. Grains, legumes, nuts, and seeds are good sources of plant protein. You can meet all of your protein needs on a whole-food, plant-based diet. If they're concerned about having enough energy, I tell them about patients who feel less lethargic after adopting a plant-based diet."

"On the other hand, I also say that just because a food is vegan doesn't mean it's healthy. Oreos are vegan, after all."

One study demonstrated that coronary heart disease showed signs of reversing after a year by adopting a vegetarian diet, aerobic exercise, stress management, and other healthy habits. The study participants who stuck to these lifestyle changes continued to reverse their coronary atherosclerosis after five years. Another revealed that coronary artery disease patients who followed a vegan diet significantly reduced inflammation, while those who followed the American Heart Association dietary guidelines did not.

"Americans need to try something different because what we are doing isn't
working. Before the pandemic, gym memberships were rising. Drug prescriptions to address heart disease are increasing, and surgeries are becoming more advanced and less invasive. And yet, according to the CDC, heart disease death rates in adults age 45-64 increased every year from 2011-2017. Fruits, veggies, beans, legumes, and whole grains might be the simple solution to our health crisis," Dr. Gempel says.

**Small steps lead to significant changes**

You don't have to go full-on vegan to strengthen your heart. Dr. Gempel believes that every step taken to limit animal protein produces benefits. Here are some strategies she shares with patients:

**Limit vs. eliminate.**

The concept of gradually cutting back on certain foods is easier to swallow when you're trying to change a lifetime of eating habits. Try eliminating one animal protein source at a time. When you adapt, move onto something else, choosing more and more foods from plant sources. If you want to reduce but not eliminate meat, try the Mediterranean diet. A study published in the Nutrition, Metabolic & Cardiovascular Diseases journal showed scientific evidence that the diet reduces inflammation and improves cells' function inside the blood vessels, both of which reduce your risk of dying from heart disease.

Or try filling half of your plate with fruits or veggies, a quarter with whole grains or beans, and a quarter or less with animal protein.

**Keep it simple.**

If the food label has words you can't pronounce or an endless list of ingredients, it's highly processed. Whole foods have fewer, more recognizable ingredients.
Plan and prep.
Designate a few hours a week to prepare several meals at once. With nutritious meals on hand, your family is less likely to snack on unhealthy foods from the kitchen. Planning is critical to success.

Cultivate convenience.
Frozen fruits and vegetables eliminate cleaning and chopping chores, and a heart-healthy, minimally-processed frozen veggie burger makes a quick meal when paired with a salad.

Substitute and experiment.
Instead of buttering that baked potato, try a drizzle of cold-pressed olive oil. Toss in a few fresh chopped (or dried) herbs instead of salt. When dining out, ask for steamed vegetables instead of fries and choose baked or broiled fish over burgers.

Stay motivated.
List the reasons you want to make changes (avoiding heart surgery, being there for your grandchildren, etc.) and post it on the fridge. Watch health-inspired documentaries, listen to a vegan lifestyle podcast, join an online community, or find an accountability partner.

Tweak your food traditions.
Cultural barriers to plant-based eating are common, especially in Miami. "Many of my patients are of Cuban heritage. They can enjoy family get-togethers with a few simple changes. For the traditional chicken and rice dish, substitute brown rice for white and add beans and salsa or peppers, onions, tomatoes, and avocado. Eliminate cheese and use chicken as a condiment, not the entrée."
Redirecting your food choices may be challenging, but it’s possible to have fun in the process by experimenting with new recipes, cooking methods, spices, and ingredients. You'll not only become more creative in the kitchen; you may live longer as a result.

**Top Sources of Plant-based Protein**

**Hemp seeds**: 10 grams per 2 tablespoons

**Pumpkin seeds**: 10 grams per ¼ cup

**Amaranth**: 9 grams per 1 cup

**Quinoa**: 8 grams per 1 cup

**Buckwheat**: 6 grams per 1 cup

**Lentils**: 18 grams per 1 cup

**Chickpeas**: 14 grams per 1 cup

**Pistachios**: 6 grams per ounce

_Nancy Moreland is a contributing writer for UMiami Health News. She has written for several major health care systems and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Her writing also appears in the Chicago Tribune._
7 simple steps to embrace the Mediterranean Diet

Research shows that foods traditionally associated with countries along the Mediterranean Sea reduce the risk of heart disease, stroke, and certain cancers. Read more.