

Plant-Based Nutrition

Frequently Asked Questions & Concerns



Nutrition Information

What is a plant-based diet?

A plant-based diet means that the majority of food a person eats comes from plants and contains little or no meat, poultry, or seafood. Some people include eggs and dairy products in their plant-based meals, while others do not. Eating meatless meals more often is the basis of a plant-based diet. Vegans are total vegetarians who eat no animal products at all.

What are the health benefits of a plant-based diet?

Research studies have shown that people who eat only plant-based diets are at lower risk for heart disease, certain cancers, and other health problems such as obesity, diabetes, and high blood pressure. Compared to the more typical Western diet, plant-based diets are lower in saturated fat and cholesterol, and higher in “good” fats and fiber, all of which support better health.

Can I get all necessary nutrients eating a plant-based diet?

Common concerns with plant-based diets are that they do not provide enough protein, iron, calcium, vitamin D and vitamin B12. But you can address these nutrient concerns by including certain foods in your diet:

- It is easy to get adequate protein with a plant-based diet as long as the diet includes beans, lentils, nuts, seeds, grains, and vegetables. Most Americans (USA) consume more than enough protein, so decreasing protein-rich foods is usually not a concern.
- Iron is found in nuts, seeds, legumes, potatoes, green peas, quinoa, and fortified breakfast cereals. Adding vitamin C-rich foods to meals (such as citrus, mango, tomatoes, greens, or peppers) improves iron absorption from plant foods.
- Calcium can be found in dark green leafy vegetables, nuts, and seeds. However, because the compounds found in some plant foods can make it harder for your body to absorb the calcium, it is important to consume a wide variety of calcium-rich plant foods and calcium-fortified products, such as fortified soy and almond milk.
- We get vitamin D from two sources: food and sunlight exposure. Fatty fish and egg yolks are common foods with natural vitamin D. Because so few foods contain natural vitamin D, cow’s milk has been fortified with this vitamin for years. If you do not drink cow’s milk, you can meet some of your vitamin D needs by incorporating fortified soy, rice or almond milk and fortified juices and cereals into your diet. Vitamin D is also produced in the body through exposure to sunlight. Factors that limit the body’s ability to make enough vitamin D from the sun include sunscreen use, clothing, darker skin pigmentation, pollution, aging, and extra body fat. As a result, for most people, adding a vitamin D supplement is a good idea.
- People who eat no animal products at all must supplement their diets with vitamin B12 or fortified food products such as microalgae, seaweeds and nutritional brewers’ yeast (such as RED STAR brand), as plants do not provide active B12. You can also check the ingredient labels on foods to determine if the foods contain B12.

For more information on getting the necessary nutrients or on supplementation needs with a plant-based diet, check with your doctor or a Registered Dietitian (RD). More information is also available in Kaiser's Vegetarian Meal Planning handout.

If I do not like a lot of plant choices, how can I be sure that I am getting a well-balanced diet?

A nutritionally balanced plant-based diet needs to include fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and plant proteins (legumes, beans, nuts), so eating well on this diet can be a challenge if you dislike many of these foods. Make the transition to a plant-based diet gradually so you will be sure you can eat well with few or no animal-based foods. Start by finding a couple of vegetables you like and experimenting with tasty ways of cooking them. Gradually advance to trying one new vegetable a week. Also try buying food in season. Be open to trying new fruits and vegetables.

What can I use in place of dairy milk and yogurt?

Try using calcium-fortified soy, rice, and/or almond milk and soy or coconut yogurt in place of dairy. Of the non-dairy options, soy milk and yogurt provide the most protein and essential amino acids. All of these options are now available in most grocery stores.

I have type 2 diabetes. Can I still get a good balance of protein and carbohydrates on a plant-based diet?

Yes. Try the plate method, by filling half of your plate with non-starchy vegetables (salad, greens), $\frac{1}{4}$ of your plate with a whole grain or starchy vegetable (potatoes, corn, brown rice, whole wheat pasta, other whole grains), and $\frac{1}{4}$ of your plate with high-protein grains or beans (beans, tofu, peas, lentils, quinoa, edamame), along with a small piece of fruit. For more information on diabetes, carbohydrates, and plant-based diets, contact your local Kaiser Permanente medical facility to speak to a Registered Dietitian.

Meal-Planning

I have a busy schedule. How do I transition to a plant-based diet?

Cook extra portions and eat leftovers on busy days. You can also freeze smaller portions of beans, soups, or other main courses, then reheat and add fresh fruit or a salad to make it a meal. Using a crockpot can also help you prepare food, as you can make one-pot meals or cook beans while at work or while sleeping.

You can also start by modifying your favorite recipes before branching out to unfamiliar foods. Try making spinach lasagna rather than meat lasagna, veggie pizza, bean chili and cornbread, or your favorite soup recipe with beans, diced firm tofu or edamame in place of chicken or meat. See the "Additional Resources" below for cookbooks and online help.

What if I don't like to cook?

Try cooking whole grains in advance (brown rice, wheat berries, steel-cut oats) and store them in the refrigerator for use over the next 3 to 4 days, or freeze for later use. Use canned instead of dried beans. Try a salad-in-a-bag with prepared dressing. Gradually build your cooking skills. Practice with easy recipes.

How often do I need to shop to avoid food spoilage?

Do your grocery shopping weekly. Always have staples (beans, rice, quinoa, dried fruit, nuts and seeds), then buy seasonal fruit and veggies. Eat the fresh leafy greens first, and if you run out, then go to frozen fruit and veggies. A great tip is to blanch fibrous vegetables (such as broccoli, cauliflower and asparagus – not more delicate vegetables like spinach) when you get home from the store. To blanch, bring a pot of water to a boil, turn off heat, put fibrous vegetables into the water for 2 to 3 minutes, and then cool them with ice water. This will make the vegetable bright in color, smaller in size and last twice as long in the refrigerator.

Additional Questions**How can I tackle food cravings for salt, meat, cheese, sugar, pastries, butter, etc.?**

Eat regularly. Try eating 3 meals and 2 to 3 snacks daily. This helps to curb the appetite and can beat food cravings. Many food cravings also disappear when processed food is eliminated or cut down from the diet. Removing processed food and adding more nutritious choices is important. The body may not be craving more food or calories; it may actually be craving nutrients. A plant-based diet can fulfill your body's nutrient requirements.

But I love cheese! How can I give it up?

You are not alone. A lot of people love cheese. Start by using less and getting accustomed to cheese as a flavor enhancer, not a main source of protein or meat replacement. There are some very tasty soy or other plant-based cheeses available now, but they are more expensive. You can make cashew or nutritional yeast "cheese" as a replacement.

How much does following a plant-based diet cost?

A plant-based diet can be very affordable. Grains, beans, nuts and seeds can be purchased in bulk in many grocery stores, and are generally less expensive than meats. Buying fruits and vegetables in season or frozen can save you money. Most dried seasonings, herbs and spices have a long shelf life.

I have meals delivered. How can I incorporate plant-based choices into these meals?

Most meal delivery services have vegetarian choices. Many of them will have cheese as a prominent ingredient in the main dish. Save half of these dishes for another meal or share with a friend. Then balance the rest of that meal with other vegetables and fruits.

What do I do if my family supports my change, but is not ready to change their eating habits?

Ask if they are willing to try eating plant-based for one month, or suggest that they try a new plant-based main course once a week. Introduce new foods along with familiar foods you know they love. For example, serve grilled portobello mushroom burgers with sliced avocado in place of a cheeseburger. You may not get your family to completely adopt your new eating style, but remember that every person is on their own personal journey. Check out the 'Additional Resources' for information on local support groups and websites.

Additional resources

- Contact your Kaiser Permanente Health Education Center or Department for health Information, programs, and other resources.
- For personalized vegetarian meal planning ask your doctor for a nutrition referral with a Registered Dietitian.
- Make an appointment with a Wellness Coach to talk about healthy choices you'd like to make.

Online

- Vegetarian Meal Planning, Kaiser Permanente
<http://www.permanente.net/homepage/kaiser/pdf/6151.pdf>
- 21daykickstart.org for help transitioning to a plant-based diet
- compassionatelivingoutreach.org or meetup.com to find out about local vegan support groups
- nutritionmd.com for help adopting a healthy diet and meal planning ideas
- veggiequeen.com for pressure cooker information, cooking videos, and recipes
- cancerproject.org and happyherbivore.com for more recipe ideas

Books

- *Prevent and Reverse Heart Disease* by Caldwell B. Esselstyn, Jr., MD
- *The Engine 2 Diet* by Rip Esselstyn
- *The China Study* by T. Colin Campbell
- *The New Becoming Vegetarian: The Essential Guide to a Healthy Vegetarian Diet, The New Becoming Vegan, and The Complete Guide to Adopting a Healthy Plant-Based Diet* by Melina & Davis
- *Vegetarian Cooking for Everyone* by Deborah Madison
- *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Plant-based Nutrition* by Julieanna Hever, MS, RD, CPT

This information is not intended to diagnose health problems or to take the place of medical advice or care you receive from your physician or other health care professional. If you have persistent health problems, or if you have additional questions, please consult with your doctor.