

YOUR
MISSION:

EAT

MORE

PLANTS

Piling extra green and less meat on your plate can protect your health, your waistline, and even your brain. But do you need to go vegetarian to reap the rewards? *The Good Life* explores.

It's the hottest thing in nutrition right now, but plant-based eating is decidedly not a fad. The approach of putting produce and superfoods center stage has been around since way before beet burgers and mustard-glazed tofu started appearing in your Instagram feed. Evolutionary anthropologists say our hunter-gatherer ancestors lived for the most part on plants—and our bodies are designed to be fueled that way. The message wasn't lost on people like King Tut, Benjamin Franklin, and Albert Einstein, all vegetarians. Somewhere along the way, however, animal products began to hog more and more space in our diets. Plants?

By Sunny Sea Gold
Photographed by Marcus Nilsson

They got the side dish treatment or worse: banishment to garnish territory. That's all changing—and fast. "Americans are eating astonishingly less meat and dairy than they were in the early 2000s," says Michael Whiteman, president of Baum + Whiteman, a leading global food-and-restaurant consultancy. At the same time, consumption of faux meats (like vegan sausages or "chicken" strips), as well as plant-based yogurts and "milks," is up. "Nondairy alternatives have been one of the all-time most-requested ideas from customers," a Starbucks spokesperson says.

Dining at every end of the spectrum, from fast-food joints to Michelin-starred restaurants, is proof of the phenomenon. White Castle now offers a veggie slider served on a vegan bun. And Jean-Georges Vongerichten, the world-famous chef known for his classic French cooking, recently opened his first plant-based restaurant, abcV. Who would have thought a dish of warm carrots with nut butter, chiles, and limes could be your fancy lunch entrée? "Vegetables are no longer an afterthought to fill out the space next to a steak," says Whiteman. "It's all very 'cheffy.'"

Cheffy? Sure. Good for you? Without a doubt. Eating more plants has major benefits for your body, slashing your risk for everything from cancer and heart disease to dementia and obesity. And whether or not the goal is to help the earth while you boost your health, that's exactly what happens when you cut back on meat. (See "Healthy You, Healthy Planet," page 85.)

Notice we said "cut back," not "cut out." With plant-based eating, you can still order the occasional burger. In fact, the general consensus among nutrition leaders we spoke with is that this diet can include a little of everything, as long as most of what you eat is healthy food grown from the ground. "One of the things we've come to realize is that there really is a continuum of plant-based eating, and any way people can move themselves in that direction is going to be good," says Walter Willett, M.D., a professor of epidemiology and nutrition at

Harvard's Chan School of Public Health.

Exactly how you shift toward eating more plants is up to you, but start by taking an honest look at how much of your diet includes meat. Then make one or two plant swaps per day, suggests Janis Jibrin, a registered dietitian and adjunct professor of nutrition at American University. A few ideas: Fill tacos with pinto or black beans instead of chicken, add crunch to salads with sunflower seeds or walnuts instead of crumbled bacon, and make sloppy joes with lentils instead of ground beef.

Having the freedom to tailor your approach is what makes plant-based eating sustainable in the long term. Some people treat meat as a condiment at every meal. Others take meat completely off the plate the majority of the time, then splurge every so often on a worth-it steak or roast. If it helps to have a "meat motto" in place, feel free to adopt principles from experts. You could try "meatless weekends," says registered dietitian Maya Feller. Designating six plant-only meals out of the 21 meals you eat in a week will cut your animal-product intake by nearly a third in one fell swoop. Or do "meat after dark," a tactic inspired by Mark Bittman, author of *VB6: Eat Vegan Before 6 P.M. to Lose Weight and Restore Your Health for Good*. You'll find more bright ideas from Bittman and other plant-based eaters throughout this story, but first learn the benefits of this one diet switch. That may be all the inspiration you need.

● YOUR BODY ON PLANTS

If food is medicine, there's nothing more potent than plant-based eating. Over and over, research suggests that the optimal lifestyle for preventing disease is a diet big on plants and naturally low in animal protein, harmful fats, and refined carbohydrates. Eat this way if you want to...

Keep your brain sharp.

Scientists at Rush University Medical Center examined several diets to determine which ones could stave off cognitive decline and Alzheimer's disease. The three winners were the Mediterranean diet, the DASH diet, and the MIND diet. The common denominator in all those plans? A plant-based focus.

Slash your diabetes and heart disease risk.


Harvard's Nurses' Health Study discovered that women who ate lots of vegetable protein—from seeds, beans, and soy—had a 30% reduced risk of heart disease and about 20% less chance of diabetes compared with those who got most of their protein from animal sources.

Avoid the achy-breaky body woes.

Some small studies have suggested that vegan and semi-vegetarian diets may help ease pain, stiffness, and joint swelling for people with arthritis, possibly because a diet high in plant compounds can help decrease inflammation.

Keep your weight in check.

Vegetarians are less likely than meat eaters to be overweight, according to a study in the *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition*. Choosing plant-based whole foods over meat is an easy way to cut calories. For example, a cup of vegetarian chili instead of all-beef can save 80 calories and 16 grams of fat. And dipping your veggies in 3 tablespoons of hummus instead of dairy-packed queso can delete 55 calories and 5 grams of fat.



Seeds give salads a satisfying texture.

Chickpeas bring along 14 grams of protein per cup.

Plant snack! Soybeans (a.k.a. edamame) are the new jerky.

SO MANY WAYS TO EAT MORE PLANTS

In the average American diet, 70% of protein comes from animal sources. The diets below all share a focus on reducing that percentage.

Flexitarian Omnivorous, but this way of eating relies mostly on plants, with smaller amounts of meat, seafood, poultry, and dairy.

Vegetarian There are different kinds of vegetarians, depending on what they cut out. A lacto-ovo vegetarian diet excludes meat, fish, and poultry but includes dairy and eggs.

Pescatarian This diet eliminates meat and poultry but includes fish and seafood.

Vegan No meat, dairy, or other animal-procured foods such as eggs. Plants, nuts/seeds, and soy provide protein.

Plant-based whole foods (PBWF) Like vegan diets, PBWF takes meat and dairy off the menu. But it also eliminates oils, sugar, and processed foods of any kind. (Did you know that glazed doughnuts are vegan? But they ain't health food.)



Mark Bittman

Renowned food writer famous for his *New York Times* articles and 20 books.

“I’m strictly vegan during the day, with no white flour or rice as well, and then completely omnivorous after 6 P.M. The labels don’t really matter, whether you’re flexitarian, plant-based, vegan, vegetarian, etc. My view is we should all be focusing on eating more plants and less junk.”



Mollie Katzen

Author of the groundbreaking *Moosewood Cookbook* and a matriarch of veggie culture.

“I would say I eat a plant-based diet that most days looks like this: 80% is made up of vegetables, fruits, and nuts. Then the rest is dairy, which I love, and small amounts (3 to 4 ounces) of meat or fish. I use the meat or fish as a garnish on vegetables. Healthy eating doesn’t have to be about deprivation—there’s plenty of room for what you enjoy.”



Kara Lawson
ESPN analyst and former WNBA star.

“I became vegetarian in 2011, then cut out dairy and felt some great results. I wasn’t as sore from training day to day and was able to recover from games and all the plane travel more quickly. I still travel a lot, but I make it work. I eat a ton of oatmeal, which you can find anywhere—and it has protein. I get a lot of big organic salads with chickpeas or kidney beans from grocery store salad bars, and I stock up on cashews from the bulk bins, too.”



Neal Harden

Chef de cuisine at abcV, star chef Jean-Georges Vongerichten’s new plant-based restaurant in New York.

“I love cooking and eating with plants as the focus. It’s so alive, colorful, and positive—I almost always feel good about what’s in my body at the end of the day. All foods carry a power and an energy, and we must choose wisely what nourishes us and the world around us. I eat mostly green things, whole grains, lots of nuts and seeds, mushrooms, herbs and bitter vegetables, roots, sourdough breads, fermented foods, things from my garden, berries, wine. I’ll eat dairy, but mostly just to participate in culture, like if I’m out with friends who’ve ordered pizza or if I’m tasting the food of a great chef.”



Dr. Oz

“I eat veggies as a foundation, and my main proteins are beans, nuts, and eggs. Out of 21 meals in a week, three or four include non-plant proteins. If it’s fish, I let that be the main course. But I treat other types of meat as accoutrements to the plant foods on the plate. It helps that my wife, Lisa, is vegetarian and the main cook at home. You could call me kitchen challenged.”



PLANT SUPERPOWERS

What can explain the almost miraculous perks of plant-based eating? For one thing, you’re shoving aside less healthy foods such as red meat, says Kim Williams, M.D., chief of cardiology at Rush University School of Medicine in Chicago. After seeing his own cholesterol skyrocket, Williams went vegan and cut out all animal protein from his diet.

Just six weeks later, his cholesterol had dropped from 170 to 90. It’s not just a cholesterol issue; the Nurses’ Health Study found that women who ate the most red meat in general had a 22% higher risk of breast cancer than those who ate the least. And the more plants you eat, the less likely you are to pile on hot dogs, ham, sausage, and other cured meats, which were linked to cancer risk in multiple studies. In case you’re wondering about fake meats: Yes, they’re processed, so they’re not perfect swaps, but a meatless patty from the freezer aisle is likely to be better for you than beef

because of the reduction in artery-clogging saturated fat, say experts.

Swapping beans, nuts, or veggie burgers for meat also means you're dosing yourself with a whole symphony of health-promoting substances from plants. You get fiber, which fills you up, aids digestion, and balances gut bacteria, and you up your intake of unsaturated fatty acids. These beneficial fats found in foods such as vegetable oils, nuts, and seeds support your brain and heart.

Plants are also packed with natural substances called phytonutrients or phytochemicals. "Vitamins and minerals, water, protein, carbs, and fat in plants are the main things you need in order to live, but phytochemicals are the little things that help you live better and longer, without getting afflicted by the various chronic diseases that drag us all down," says Jed W. Fahey, Sc.D., director of the Cullman Chemoprotection Center at Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, who studies how vegetables help protect against disease. Some phytochemicals may reduce genetic changes caused by UV light and reverse cell damage from free radicals. That's important because oxidative stress—when the body is overloaded with free radicals—has been linked with serious conditions like heart disease, Parkinson's, and cancer. Suddenly, starting the day with a quinoa-and-berry breakfast and ending it with a falafel salad for dinner seems like a delicious defense, doesn't it?

4 TIMES PLANT-BASED DOESN'T EQUAL HEALTHY

A diet low in animal products is only nutritious if you avoid sneaky pitfalls, like:

1 When you're fooled by misleading labels.

In the same way that "low carb" and "low fat" were once the focus of marketing mania, more than 700 new products making plant-based claims have been launched since 2014. "It's important to be skeptical. Don't toss something into your grocery cart just because the label reads 'meat-free,' 'nondairy,' or 'made from fruit,'" says Ashley Koff, R.D., a nutrition expert in Washington, D.C. "Check the ingredients; not all products that contain plants are good for you." Almond-milk ice cream, for example, doesn't get a health halo just because heart-healthy nuts replace heavy cream. The reality? It could be packed with high-fructose corn syrup and tally as many as 500 calories per cup.

2 When your favorite protein is processed fake meat.

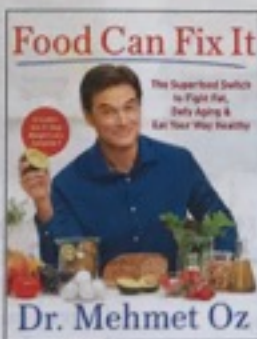
Go easy on faux meats and burgers that are highly processed and loaded with sodium. And look for products that contain *whole* plants like edamame and corn, as opposed to "hydrolyzed soy protein" and other isolates—nutrients that have been chemically extracted and isolated from the whole food, says Koff.

3 When you OD on vegan junk food. (Hint: sugar, sugar, sugar.)

Even a 100% plant-based diet can be less than ideal if it's high in the sweet stuff. Relying on sweetened convenience foods like baked goods and granola bars is a trap too many vegans and vegetarians fall into, says Dr. Oz. "I call these folks carbararians."

4 When you get low on B12.

Semi-vegetarians may not have to worry about this, but vegans who cut out all meat and dairy often need to take B12 and sometimes D and calcium supplements, too, says Dawn Jackson Blatner, a registered dietitian nutritionist and author of *The Flexitarian Diet*. Low levels of B and D vitamins are strongly linked to anxiety, depression, and other mood disorders, so making sure you get enough is key.



INSPIRED TO START EATING HEALTHIER?

Dr. Oz's new book, *Food Can Fix It: The Superfood Switch to Fight Fat, Defy Aging & Eat Your Way Healthy*, is out this September. With its countless plant-based recipes and shopping lists, you won't have to worry about what's for dinner. Reserve your copy now; preorder at Amazon, Barnes & Noble (bn.com), or wherever books are sold.

HEALTHY YOU, HEALTHY PLANET

Experts we spoke to say that moving away from a meat-heavy diet is the single most important thing a person can do for the environment. When you see the numbers, they're truly staggering:

10 million...

...cars: If every American ate one-third less beef each year, the environmental benefit would be as powerful as taking 10 million cars off the road, says the Natural Resources Defense Council.

70%...

...of deforestation in the Amazon: More than two-thirds of the trees that have disappeared from the rain forest were cut down in order to make room for grazing livestock. Beef is exported from the Amazon, including to the U.S.

1/4...

...of your food-related carbon footprint: Ditching meat could slash your dietary contribution to global warming by 25%. But any shift to eating less helps.