

Plant-Based Nutrition

Frequently Asked Questions & Concerns



Nutrition Information

What is a plant-based diet?

A plant-based diet means that most of the food you eat comes from plants and contains little or no meat, poultry, or seafood. For some, eating meatless meals more often is the basis of a plant-based diet. Vegetarians don't eat meat or fish, but may eat eggs or dairy. Vegans avoid all animal products, including eggs and dairy.

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

Research has shown that eating a plant-based diet lowers your risk for:

- Heart disease
- Certain cancers
- Obesity
- Diabetes
- High blood pressure

Compared to a 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 the nutrients I need eating a plant-based diet?

A common concern with plant-based diets is that they don't provide enough protein, iron, calcium, vitamin D, and vitamin B12. But you can get these nutrients by including certain foods in your diet.

- **Protein** from beans, lentils, nuts, seeds, grains, and vegetables.
- **Iron** from 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** from dark green leafy vegetables, nuts, seeds, and foods with calcium added. It's important to consume a wide variety of calcium-rich plant foods and calcium-fortified products, such as fortified soy and almond milk.
- **Vitamin D** from fatty fish and egg yolks. Because so few foods contain natural vitamin D, cow's milk has been fortified with this vitamin for years. If you don't drink cow's milk, you can meet some of your vitamin D needs by adding fortified soy, rice, or almond milk and fortified juices and cereals into your diet. Vitamin D is also produced in the body from sunlight. Factors that limit the body's ability to make enough vitamin D from the sun include sunscreen, clothing, darker skin color, pollution, aging, and extra body fat. So taking a vitamin D supplement is a good idea.
- **Vitamin B12** from fortified food products such as microalgae, seaweed, and nutritional yeast. Plants don't provide active B12. If you don't eat any animal products, take a supplement with vitamin B12.

How can I eat a well-balanced diet if I dislike a lot of plant foods?

A nutritious plant-based diet needs to include fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and plant proteins (legumes, beans, nuts). Eating well can be a challenge if you don't like many of these foods.

Start by:

- Transitioning to a plant-based diet gradually, to ensure you can eat well with few or no animal-based foods.
- Finding a couple of seasonal vegetables you like and new, tasty ways to cook them.
- Trying one new vegetable a week.
- Being open to new fruits and vegetables.

Plant-based diets can be unhealthy if you also eat too many processed or “junk” foods that contain white flour, added sugars, and fats. It's important to stay focused on “whole foods” that are minimally processed. When you eat packaged foods, look for those with real food you can recognize in the ingredients.

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

Try calcium-fortified soy, rice, almond, or other plant milk or yogurt. Soy milk and yogurt provide the most protein and essential amino acids. These foods are available in most grocery stores.

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

Yes. Try the plate method. Fill:

- ½ your plate with nonstarchy vegetables (salad and other greens).
- ¼ your plate with a whole-grain or starchy vegetable (potatoes, corn, brown rice, whole-wheat pasta, other whole grains).
- ¼ your plate with high-protein grains or beans (beans, tofu, peas, lentils, quinoa, edamame), along with a small piece of fruit.

Meal Planning**I have a busy schedule. How do I start a plant-based diet?**

- Cook extra portions and eat leftovers on busy days.
- Freeze smaller portions of beans, soups, or other main courses, then reheat and add fresh fruit or a salad to make it a meal.
- Use a crockpot to make one-pot meals or cook beans while you're working or sleeping.
- Modify your favorite recipes before trying unfamiliar foods. Try spinach 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.

What if I don't like to cook?

- Buy precooked frozen grains (brown rice, wheat berries, steel-cut oats) and store them in the refrigerator for use within 3 to 4 days, or freeze for later use.
- Use canned beans.
- Try a salad-in-a-bag with prepared dressing.
- Practice with easy recipes to gradually build your cooking skills.

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

- Shop weekly.
- Always have staples (beans, rice, quinoa, dried fruit, nuts, and seeds), then buy seasonal fruit and veggies.
- Eat fresh leafy greens first, and if you run out, go to frozen fruit and veggies.
- Blanch fibrous vegetables (broccoli, cauliflower, and asparagus) 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 makes the vegetables bright in color, smaller in size, and last twice as long in the refrigerator.

How can I tackle food cravings for nonplant foods?

- Eat regularly. Try to have 3 meals and 2 to 3 snacks daily. This helps curb your appetite and beat food cravings.
- Avoid processed food and eat more nutritious choices. Your body may not be craving more food or calories—it may actually be craving nutrients. Many food cravings disappear when processed food is cut back or stopped from your diet. A plant-based diet can fulfill your body's nutrient requirements.

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

You're not alone. A lot of people love cheese. Start by using less and getting used to cheese as a flavor enhancer, not a main source of protein or meat replacement. There are very tasty soy or other plant-based cheeses available now. You also can make your own cashew or nutritional yeast "cheese."

How much does a plant-based diet cost?

A plant-based diet can be very affordable. To save money, buy:

- Grains, beans, nuts, and seeds in bulk. They're generally less expensive than meats.
- Fresh fruits and in season.
- Dried seasonings, herbs, and spices. They have a long shelf life, and some stores sell them in bulk, at lower cost.

I have meals delivered. How can I add plant-based choices?

Most delivery services have vegetarian options, and some offer plant-based meals. Many of the vegetarian choices will have cheese as a main ingredient. 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 if my family supports me, but is not ready to change their eating habits?

- Ask if they're willing to try eating plant-based for 1 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 sets their own pace.

Additional resources

For more health information, tools, and other resources:

- Search kp.org/mydoctor and search “plant-based eating.”
- Contact your local Health Education.