



The Benefits of a Whole Foods, Plant-Based Diet

By Hannah Thomas

I'll admit, my initial desire to embrace a plant-based lifestyle was fueled solely by the conviction that hurting animals was wrong and not something I wanted to participate in any longer.

So when my family asked me how I planned on staying healthy without consuming meat, eggs, or dairy, I didn't know how to answer them. I just knew that I didn't want to harm animals. My intuition was pulling me in the direction of veganism, but I lacked the knowledge necessary to take on such a huge lifestyle shift. So I started researching. I watched documentaries and read books and articles, and ultimately came to the realization that a plant-based diet is not only adequate for human health, but beneficial.

And that's when everything changed. I made the switch to veganism, and introduced all the information I had learned to my family. To my surprise, they were receptive. My mom, who had multiple sclerosis, fibromyalgia, rheumatoid arthritis, fatty liver disease, and struggled with obesity, decided to join me in the hope that this lifestyle would help her take off the weight she had been trying to lose for years. And my stepfather, also overweight and diabetic, hopped on board with similar motivations.

A year and a half later, my mom has lost 70 pounds, cured her fatty liver disease, and gotten off five of her medications. Similarly, my stepdad has lost weight, lowered his cholesterol, and manages his diabetes. Today, they enjoy increased energy and less pain. But they are not the only people who have gotten these results. A diet based on whole plant foods has been proven to have even more profound impacts on human health, such as reversing heart disease, preventing cancer, and allowing people to effortlessly lose weight without obsessing over calories or portion sizes.

For instance, in the most comprehensive study of nutrition ever conducted, The China Study, researchers looked at the mortality of more than fifty diseases from 60 counties and 130 villages in China. They found that the diet of those living in rural China, which was low in fat, low in animal protein and high in fiber, produced cholesterol levels significantly lower than those found in Americans. Similarly, their risk of dying from coronary heart disease was far lower than the average United States citizen. However, when the same people increased their consumption of animal protein, their chances of developing coronary heart disease increased proportionally [1]. And, if that's not enough, a low-fat vegetarian diet has even been found to *reverse* heart disease [2].

Time and time again, studies have shown that “vegetarian populations have lower rates of heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, and obesity,” [3]. For example, one discovered that

those who ate processed meat at least weekly were 74% more likely to become diabetic than those who abstained from meat entirely [4], and another one concluded that long term abstinence from meat consumption may increase longevity [5]. Additionally, the World Health Organization classified processed meat as a Group 1 carcinogen, the same group which includes plutonium, asbestos, and tobacco, based on the overwhelming amount of evidence that processed meat causes cancer. So in simple terms, a whole foods, plant-based diet can decrease your chances of developing coronary heart disease, diabetes, and cancer, as well as help you manage your weight, which in and of itself protects you from many diseases often brought on by obesity.

What Does a Whole Foods, Plant-based Diet Look Like?

It's important to distinguish between a vegan diet and one based on whole plant foods. A vegan diet is merely one which excludes the consumption of animal products. So, for instance, someone who subsists entirely on Oreos and potato chips would be classified as a vegan. However, a whole foods, plant-based diet focuses on eating foods in their whole forms, while excluding processed foods, oils, and animal products. So, while vegans who are less health-conscious may include potato chips in their day-to-day diet, a vegan eating whole foods will be eating baked potatoes instead.

If the idea of making such a drastic change in your lifestyle feels overwhelming, it's okay to ease into it. But you'll most likely find it much easier than you imagined. Especially for those who have jumped from diet to diet, counted calories and limited their portion size. A whole foods, plant-based diet will seem effortless in comparison. The beauty of whole plant foods is that most of them, specifically fruits, vegetables, and starches, boast high fiber contents while being low in calories. So you can eat a much larger volume of food and actually feel satisfied, without worrying about whether or not you're eating too much. In reality, it is much easier to eat too little on a vegan diet than it is to eat too much. And, considering the benefits this lifestyle can bring, the change to a whole foods vegan lifestyle is one well worth making.

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