



Is it time to veg out?



Reaping the benefits of a plant-based diet

:: by Lia Tremblay

When you think of going vegetarian, odds are your mind goes right to the things you'd miss out on: Thanksgiving turkey, spaghetti and meatballs, hot dogs on the Fourth of July.

But what you would likely get in return is significant: a longer life, a leaner body and a decreased risk of cancer, diabetes and cardiovascular disease. In some cases, a plant-based diet can even reverse advanced coronary artery disease and Type 2 diabetes.

A great example of this is found in a long-term study of Seventh-Day Adventists, a Christian denomination that emphasizes wholeness and health, including a vegetarian diet. Compared to their non-Adventist counterparts living in the same state, Adventists were found to have astonishingly lower rates of death from lung cancer, breast cancer and coronary heart disease.

Why Is Plant-Based So Good for You?

The benefits are two-fold. First, a plant-based diet lets you avoid some of the troublesome contents of meaty foods: saturated fats, cholesterol and inflammation-causing carnitine, not to mention the antibiotics routinely pumped into most livestock today.

And by leaving more room on your plate for vegetables, fruits and whole grains, you can reap more of the well-known health benefits those foods have to offer.

“It’s really a diet for everybody,” said Solomon Ghebregziabiher, M.D., of Village Internal Medicine (affectionately known to his patients as Dr. Solomon). “In internal medicine, my main job is preventive care. Helping people avoid medication when possible, keep their weight and blood pressure down … a plant-based diet is helpful with all of this.”

Dr. Solomon is especially eager to recommend this change for patients who have struggled with obesity, diabetes and heart trouble. But, as you might imagine, it can be a tough sell.

“I tell them, ‘You’ve been doing the standard American diet for all these years and this is where we are,’ he said. “Just try to cut back on the meat a little bit, increase the plants in your diet, see how you do.”

Testing the Waters

For many people, this gradual approach to a plant-based diet is helpful. Knowing that they don’t have to commit to a completely meat-free life can make it easier to change their diet overall.

Some people introduce the change to their families with “Meatless Mondays,” so that just one day of the week is dedicated to plant-based meals. This is a great way to explore foods and recipes that may eventually become staples of your new diet. As you become more comfortable with meals where meat isn’t the main event, you may find that you don’t really miss it.

Dr. Solomon is quick to point out, however, that leaving meat off the plate is only half the battle.

“It’s important that you replace that meat with a variety of vegetables, legumes, and other plant-based foods,” he said. “You want to add nutrients to your meal, not just eliminate meat from it.”

Easier Than Ever

Though the idea of changing your diet might be daunting, there has never been a better time to adjust to a plant-based diet. With the popularity of documentaries like “Forks Over Knives” and “Vegucated,” not to mention legions of vegetarian and vegan celebrities raving about their health, it has become a much more mainstream way to live. Soy milk and veggie burgers are no longer relegated to college-area health food stores; they’re in just about every grocery store.

Dr. Solomon recommends exploring the website of the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine at pcrm.org. Among other helpful health tips, you’ll find lots of guidance and recipes on making the switch to a more plant-based diet. They even have a Vegetarian Starter Kit, packed with helpful information on getting all the tasty benefits of your four new food groups: fruits, vegetables, legumes and grains.

Here are some tips to help ease the transition:

Think of meat-free dishes you already love, like eggplant parmesan or hummus, and plan to enjoy those more often.

Find ways to replace the meat in your other favorites, like substituting refried beans for beef in a burrito or stirring mushrooms into your favorite pasta dish.

Research restaurants with great vegetarian options. Even a steakhouse will have salads for you, but some places really excel at offering a variety of meat-free treats.

Check out produce at a variety of stores and markets. Now that you have more room on your plate for fruits and vegetables, you might really enjoy finding new favorites like mango or jicama.

However you go about it, fueling your days with a more plant-based diet is a smart move. For every hot dog or turkey leg you miss, you get tasty new foods and happier doctor visits. That’s a pretty smart trade!