Evidence Summary for Plant-Based Diets
Reviews, Trials, and Landmark Observational Studies
Last update, March 2021

Definitions

- **Omnivorous diet**: includes animal and plant foods without any restrictions
- **Plant-based diet**: emphasizes eating more plant-based foods (i.e., fruits, vegetables, grains, nuts, seeds, and legumes/beans) and fewer or no animal products (i.e., red meat, poultry, fish, eggs, and dairy)
- **Vegetarian diet**: a plant-based diet that generally does not include meat, but may include eggs (ovo-vegetarian), dairy products (lacto-vegetarian), or both (lacto-ovo-vegetarian); some vegetarian diets also include fish (pescatarian), poultry or fowl (pollotarian)
- **Semi-vegetarian diet**: a vegetarian diet that excludes some types of meat (most often red meat), but may contain other types (e.g., poultry, fish)
- **Flexitarian diet**: a vegetarian-inclined diet that limits meat intake, but still includes meat
- **Vegan diet**: a more restrictive vegetarian diet that completely excludes animal products
- **Whole-food, plant-based diet**: a diet that emphasizes unrefined plants (such as whole grains), and avoids refined plant foods that have been processed and stripped of their nutrients (e.g., refined grains, added sugars, and extracted oils)

Note: There is increasing use of flexitarian diet and semi-vegetarian diet in the literature; the definitions here are adapted from Rosenfeld DL. The psychology of vegetarianism: recent advances and future directions. Appetite 2018; 131:125-38.

Motivations for Becoming Vegetarian

The 4 most common motivations people have for going vegetarian, in descending order of prevalence, include concerns related to the well-being of animals, their own health, the environment, and religion:
1. **Animal rights/welfare** – concern for the well-being of animals used for food, or the belief that using animals for food is unethical or immoral
2. **Health** – concern for one’s own health, such as avoiding disease (e.g., heart disease, hypertension) or maintaining a healthy body weight
3. **The environment** – concern for the effects of meat (and other animal product) production on the environment (e.g., greenhouse gas emissions, water usage, pollution)
4. **Religion** – based on the rules of one’s religious beliefs


Another, more theoretical, motivation for becoming vegetarian relates to social identity, reflecting a desire to see oneself as vegetarian and to identify with this social category; a high social identity fosters belonging and helps make sense of social environments.

Plain Language Summary of Evidence

1. Research provides consistent evidence that plant-based diets offer significant benefits in promoting overall health and in preventing, managing, or treating many chronic diseases including excess weight, high blood pressure, coronary artery disease, high cholesterol, type 2 diabetes, and some cancers (colon, stomach, intestines).

2. The evidence is most supportive of increased consumption of whole (unrefined) plant foods as providing benefits, in contrast to reducing animal product in the diet, or removing them entirely.

3. Within the category of plant-based diet there is some evidence to suggest that vegan diets provide benefits over other vegetarian diets. While there is little evidence that a whole-food plant-based diet is better than any other type of vegan diet, there is mounting evidence that eating whole plant foods is more beneficial than eating refined plant foods.

4. Some of the observed health benefits of plant-based diets may be due, in part, to other lifestyle patterns or interventions that often accompany these diets, such as smoking cessation, limited alcohol consumption, stress reduction, and a greater emphasis on exercise and fitness.

5. Current evidence on plant-based diets is based on people whose characteristics may differ from regions with a high prevalence of under-represented minorities, but the higher levels of obesity, diabetes, and other chronic diseases in these regions may accentuate the benefits of plant-based diets.

Executive Summary of Evidence

1. There is robust evidence on the impact of a plant-based diet on disease, mortality, and metabolic profiles based on large, population-based cohort studies that span several decades. These studies span the world and include (in order of decreasing sample size):
   a. UK Biobank Resource, N=500,000 enrolled 2006-2010
   b. Lifetime Risk Pooling Project, N=225,000 enrolled 1948-2010
   e. Prospective Urban Rural Epidemiology (PURE) Study, N=135,335 enrolled from 2003-13
   g. NurtiNet-Santé Study, N=93,823 web-based launched in 2009
   h. European Prospective Investigation into Cancer and Nutrition (EPIC) Study, N=65,429 enrolled in the 1990s
   i. Singapore Chinese Health Study, N=63,257 enrolled 1993-98
   j. Prevention with Mediterranean Diet (PREDIMED) Study, N=7,216 enrolled from 2003-9
   k. Rotterdam Study, N=6,798 enrolled in 3 cohorts: 1989-93, 2000-01, and 2006-08
   l. The China Study, N=6,500, enrolled in 1983
   m. Tzu Chi Health Study (Taiwan), N=6,002 enrolled 2007-2009

2. Taken together, over 1,000,000 participants in large, population-based studies show lower rates of the following conditions associated with more plant foods in the diet:
   ✓ Diseases: obesity, overweight, high body mass index (BMI), prediabetes, type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, ischemic (coronary) heart disease, some cancers (gastrointestinal, colon), and metabolic syndrome (having at least 3 of the following 5 conditions: abdominal obesity, high blood pressure, high blood sugar, high serum triglycerides, and low HDL levels)
   ✓ Mortality: deaths from all-causes, cardiovascular disease, ischemic heart disease, cerebrovascular disease, and some cancers (gastrointestinal, hematopoietic, lung, lymphatic, and pancreatic)
   ✓ Metabolic profiles: lower levels of total cholesterol, LDL cholesterol, non-HDL cholesterol, apolipoprotein B, glucose levels, hemoglobin A1c, insulin resistance, and obesity inflammatory profiles (CRP, IL-6, sICAM)
Inadequate nutrition: not meeting nutritional recommendations (French NurtiNet-Santé Study)

3. One partial exception to the above comes from the Prospective Urban Rural Epidemiology (PURE) multinational-cohort study of 135,335 individuals aged 35-70 years without cardiovascular disease from 18 low-, middle-, and high-income countries (7 geographical regions: North America/Europe, South America, Middle East, south Asia, China, southeast Asia, and Africa). In this study there was less overall mortality and cardiovascular events associated with higher fat intake (including saturate fats) and higher dairy intake (more than 2 servings daily, including butter and cheese). Note: some have questioned the validity of the PURE study because of methodologic problems, especially confounding by different degrees of socio-ecomonal development in different countries and questionable dietary intake data (Harvard School of Public Health, Nutrition News: https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/nutritionsource/2017/09/08/pure-study-makes-headlines-but-the-conclusions-are-misleading/)

4. Intervention studies that randomly assign subjects with a disease or medical condition to a plant-based diet vs. a control diet (usually with meat and animal products) have found the following:

- Obese or overweight individuals randomized to a vegan or vegetarian diet for up to 1 year lost more weight, reduced BMI, and lowered cholesterol more than those on a vegetarian or omnivorous diet
- Obese or overweight individuals, who also had high lipids or cholesterol, randomized to a vegetarian diet (including some eggs and dairy) for up to 6 months had lower BMI, triglycerides, LDL cholesterol, total cholesterol, total cholesterol to HDL ratio, and apolipoprotein B to A1 ratio than those on a meat-based diet
- Patients with type 2 diabetes randomized to a vegan diet for up to 6 months had better glycemic control, less need for diabetes medications, and lower metabolic factors (hemoglobin A1c, total cholesterol, and LDL cholesterol) than those on a control diet (American Diabetes Association)
- Patients with coronary artery disease randomized to a vegetarian diet (including egg whites and low-fat milk) plus lifestyle changes (stress management, moderate exercise, smoking reduction group psychosocial support) for up to 4 years had less coronary artery disease (by angiography) and fewer cardiac events than those on a meat-based diet without any lifestyle intervention
- Patients with high cholesterol randomized to a plant-based diet (low fat, added cheese and eggs) for 4 weeks had lower LDL cholesterol than those who ate a low-fat diet with animal products

5. Studies that observed a group of patients with a disease or medical condition who were placed on a plant-based diets have found the following:

- Patients with coronary artery disease who voluntarily adopted a low-fat, plant-based diet (including skim milk, yogurt) for up to 12 years reversed, or improved, their coronary disease (angiography)
- Patients with fibromyalgia who ate a vegan diet for 3 months had less pain, joint stiffness, and overall rheumatology symptoms than those on a regular diet; vegans also had better sleep and general health
- Patients with rheumatoid arthritis who ate a low-fat vegan diet for 4 weeks reduced all arthritis symptoms, except morning stiffness

6. There increasing evidence that individuals who eat whole food, plant-based diets have better health outcomes than individuals who eat refined carbohydrates, some animal products, or both:

- Individuals who eat exclusively plant-based diets in population-based and comparative studies have lower rates of obesity, hypertension, type 2 diabetes, and cardiovascular disease than those who eat plant-based diets with some animal products
- Individuals who eat high levels of complex carbohydrates (rich in fiber and whole grains) in observational studies have a 15-30% decrease in all-cause and cardiovascular related mortality, and incidence of coronary heart disease, stroke incidence and mortality, type 2 diabetes, and colorectal cancer, compared with individuals who eat high levels of refined carbohydrates
- Individuals who eat high levels of fiber and/or whole grains in clinical trials have lower body weight, systolic blood pressure, and total cholesterol, compared to individuals who eat low levels of fiber and/or whole grains
Study Types

The purpose of this document is to summarize the best published evidence regarding the impact of plant-based diets on wellness and physical health. This is not an exhaustive list, but instead focuses on English-language articles in human subjects that fall into 4 main categories:

1. **Systematic Reviews and High-quality Reviews**: Systematic reviews, including meta-analyses, use explicit criteria to reduce bias in locating, appraising, and synthesizing information from multiple research studies to reach valid conclusions. High-quality reviews identify articles with a well-defined literature search and with explicit criteria for including or excluding studies, but may lack the rigorous protocol of a formal systematic review. Reviews are extremely useful in drawing conclusions from a large body of related research, but they are limited by the quality and consistency of the included studies.

2. **Randomized Controlled Trials (RCTs)**: RCTs are experimental studies that provide the highest level of clinical evidence regarding a specific research question. Study participants typically have a baseline condition or disorder (e.g., obesity, diabetes, high cholesterol) and are randomly assigned by the investigators to a plant-based diet or something different (e.g., omnivorous [all foods, including meat] diet, their normal baseline diet, or some other dietary restriction) and then assessed at some future time point for changes from baseline or other measures of health and disease status. RCTs provide the most reliable results because they reduce bias in how people are allocated to different treatment (diet) groups, but the results may not apply outside the study because of intensive intervention in a restricted and narrow subject group that could be difficult to replicate in more pragmatic, real-world settings.

3. **Large Cohort Studies**: These are performed in large populations of people (healthy and sick) who are surveyed regarding dietary and food habits, and then assessed at the same time, in the future, or both, for various health outcomes. The investigators then look for associations (correlations) between diet and baseline health of future disease states. By using large populations the results can often be broadly applied (generalized), but cohort studies can only discover associations (e.g., relationships) and cannot prove cause and effect.

4. **Intervention Studies**: Intervention studies begin with one or more groups of people with a specific disease, condition, or disorder and then ask them to follow a specific diet, with or without other lifestyle changes. The study may have one intervention or many, but unlike the RCT there is no random allocation to different groups. Intervention studies are great for showing changes over time (e.g., improvement from baseline), but they are limited by loss of subjects (attrition), limited ability to monitor compliance with the intervention, and by bias in how subjects are selected (often volunteers) or assigned to different interventions (if more than one).

**Systematic and High-Quality Review Articles** (alphabetical by first author)

1. Aleksandrova K, Koelman L, Rodrigues CE. Dietary patterns and biomarkers of oxidative stress and inflammation: a systematic review of observational and intervention studies. Redox Biol 2021; doi: 10.1016/j.redox.2021.101869. Systematic review of 40 observational studies, with 12,619 vegans and 179,630 omnivores, that reported 1 or more cardio-metabolic risk factors. Based on food frequency questionnaires in 28 studies, vegans had lower BMI (-1.72 kg/m2, 95% CI -2.30 to -1.16), waist circumference (-2.35 cm, 95% CI -3.93 to -0.76), LDL cholesterol (-0.49 mmol/L, 95% CI -0.62 to -0.36), triglycerides (-0.14 mmol/L, 95% CI -0.24 to -0.05), fasting blood glucose (-0.23 mmol/L, 95% CI -0.35 to -0.10), and systolic (-2.56 mm Hg, 95% CI -4.66 to -0.45) and diastolic pressure (-1.33 mm Hg, 95% CI -2.67 to -0.02). Exception was a subgroup of studies from Taiwan where vegan diets were not associated with more favorable outcomes.

2. Benatar JR, Stewart RAH. Cardiometabolic risk factors in vegans: a meta-analysis of observational studies. PLoS One 2018; 13(12):e0209086. doi: 10.1371/journal.pone.0209086. Systematic review of 40 observational studies, with 12,619 vegans and 179,630 omnivores, that reported 1 or more cardio-metabolic risk factors. Based on food frequency questionnaires in 28 studies, vegans had lower BMI (-1.72 kg/m2, 95% CI -2.30 to -1.16), waist circumference (-2.35 cm, 95% CI -3.93 to -0.76), LDL cholesterol (-0.49 mmol/L, 95% CI -0.62 to -0.36), triglycerides (-0.14 mmol/L, 95% CI -0.24 to -0.05), fasting blood glucose (-0.23 mmol/L, 95% CI -0.35 to -0.10), and systolic (-2.56 mm Hg, 95% CI -4.66 to -0.45) and diastolic pressure (-1.33 mm Hg, 95% CI -2.67 to -0.02). Exception was a subgroup of studies from Taiwan where vegan diets were not associated with more favorable outcomes.

4. Dinu M, Abbate R, Gensini GF, Casina A, Sofi F. Vegetarian, vegan diets and multiple health outcomes: a systematic review with meta-analysis of observational studies. Crit Rev Food Sci Nutr 2017; 22:3640-9. Systematic review of 86 cross-sectional and 10 cohort studies. Cross-sectional studies showed significantly reduced levels of BMI, total cholesterol, LDL cholesterol and glucose levels in vegans & vegetarians vs. omnivores; cohort studies showed less ischemic heart disease (RR 0.75, 95% CI 0.68 to 0.82) and less total cancer (RR 0.92, 95% CI, 0.87 to 0.98), but no differences in total cardiovascular disease, cerebrovascular disease, or mortality (all-cause or cancer-related). Vegans had reduced risk of cancer (RR 0.85, 95% CI 0.73 to 0.95).

5. Eichelmann F, Schwingshackl L, Fedirko V, Aleksandrova K. Effect of plant-based diets on obesity-related inflammatory profiles: a systematic review and meta-analysis of intervention trials. Obes Rev 2016; 17:1067-79. Systematic review of 29 intervention trials showed that plant-based diets had mean reductions of CRP by -0.55 mg/l (95% CI -0.78 to -0.32), IL-6 by -0.25mg/l (0.5% CI, -0.56 to 0.06), and sICAM -25.07 (95% CI -52.32 to 2.17). Pooled analyses had high heterogeneity but suggest that improved inflammatory profiles could help treat and prevent chronic disease risk.

6. Field R, Physio M, Pourkazemi F, Turton J, Rooney K. Dietary interventions are beneficial for patients with chronic pain: a systematic review with meta-analysis. Systematic review of 43 studies of adults with chronic (>3 months) non-cancer musculoskeletal pain (rheumatoid arthritis, fibromyalgia, osteoarthritis, neuropathic pain) with dietary intervention at least 2 weeks (vegetarian/vegan, single-food changes, elimination protocols, energy and/or macronutrient restriction, Mediterranean diet). Overall positive effect found for whole food, plant-based diets on pain (most often with visual analog scale), with no single diet superior. Effect sizes mostly small to moderate (SMD), but some large.

7. Gibbs J, Gaskin E, Ji C, Miller MA, Cappuccio FP. The effect of plant-based dietary patterns on blood pressure: a systematic review and meta-analysis of controlled intervention trials. J Hypertens 2021; 39:23-37. Systematic review of 41 clinical trials with adults comparing plant-based diets (vegan, vegetarian, healthy Nordic, Mediterranean, high-fiber, and high-fruit/vegetables) vs. referent or control diet, found that plant-based diets were associated with lower systolic BP (maximum mean reduction 5.5 mmHg) and diastolic BP. No relation to gender or BMI.

8. Guasch-Ferré M, Satija A, Blondin SA, et al. Meta-analysis of randomized controlled trials of red meat consumption in comparison with various comparison diets on cardiovascular risk factors. Circulation 2019; 139:1828-45. Systematic review of 36 clinical trials with 1,803 participants randomized to diets with red meat vs. diets that replaced red meat with other foods (e.g., high quality plant protein, chicken/poultry/fish, dairy, low-quality carbohydrates). Substituting red meat with high-quality plant protein sources (legumes, soy, nuts), but not with fish or low-quality carbohydrates, lowered total cholesterol, triglyceride, and LDL levels.


10. Huang RY, Huang CC, Hu FB, Chavarro JE. Vegetarian diets and weight reduction: a meta-analysis of randomized controlled trials. J Gen Intern Med 2016; 31:109-16. Systematic review of 12 randomized trials of 1,151 adults (mostly overweight or with type 2 diabetes) comparing vegan or lacto-ovo-vegetarian diets to non-vegetarian diets over a median duration of 4.5 months. The vegetarian group had 2.02 kg greater weight loss (95% CI, 1.23 to 2.80), with greater weight loss for the vegan diet (2.52 kg) than the lacto-ovo-vegetarian diet (1.48 kg), and greater weight loss for subjects followed less than 1 year (2.05 kg) than those followed 1 year or longer (1.13 kg).
11. Iguačel I, Miguel-Berges ML, Gómez-Bruton A, Moreno LA, Julián C. Veganism, vegetarianism, bone mineral density, and fracture risk: a systematic review and meta-analysis. Nutr Rev. 2019; 77:1-18. Systematic review of 20 studies (37,134 participants) assessing bone mineral density (BMD) and fracture risk with a vegan, vegetarian, or omnivorous diet. Vegans and vegetarians had lower BMD at the femoral neck and lumbar spine, and vegans also had higher fracture rates (relative risk 1.44, 95% CI, 1.05 to 1.98). Nearly all studies had exclusively women participants, so results cannot be applied to men. Potential variables that were not controlled for in the analyses, but are also associated with BMD and fracture risk, include daily hours of physical activity, duration of vegan/vegetarian diet, BMI, use of hormone replacement therapy, consumption of alcohol, and smoking behavior. Bottom line is that although not definitive, results women who are vegans should be aware of bone health and avoid dietary deficiencies.


14. Lu W, Chen H, Nu Y, et al. Dairy products intake and cancer mortality risk: a meta-analysis of 11 population-based cohort studies. Nutr J 2016; 15:91. DOI 10.1186/s12937-016-0210-9. Systematic review of 11 cohort studies (778, 929 participants) showing that total dairy products intake is not associated with all-cancer mortality risk (relative risk 0.99, 95% CI, 0.92 to 1.07), with a similar lack of association noted for subgroups (milk, yogurt, cheese, and butter in males and females). The only significant relationship was an increased risk of prostate cancer mortality (relative risk 1.50, 95% CI 1.03 to 2.17) in men for whole milk, with dose-response analysis showing a linear relationship and increased risk with a single additional serving per day (relative risk 1.43, 95% CI, 1.13 to 1.81).


17. Kwok CS, Umar Saadia, Myint PK, Mamas, MA, Loke YK. Vegetarian diet, Seventh Day Adventists and risk of cardiovascular mortality: a systematic review and meta-analysis. Int J Cardiol 2014; 176:680-6. Meta-analysis of 8 observational studies (183,321 participants) comparing a vegetarian/ non-meat group with a control group (either general population or meat-eaters) that aimed to evaluate cardiovascular mortality. Risk of bias was moderate for 5 studies and low for 2, with all studies assessing dietary intake with questionnaires. For all outcomes, studies in Seventh Day Adventists (SDA) cohorts had greater effect sizes compared with non-SDA cohorts for reduced overall mortality (SDA -32%, 95% CI, -55 to 2% vs. non-SDA +4%, 95% CI, -2 to 10%), mortality from ischemic heart disease or a cardiac event (SDA -40%, 95% CI -57 to -17% vs. non-SDA -16%, 95% CI -26 to -4%), and cerebrovascular disease mortality (SDA -29%, 95% CI -59 to 20% vs. non-SDA +3%, 95% CI -11 to 24%). All analyses had high heterogeneity. Conclude that vegetarian diet has modest cardiovascular benefit, but no clear reduction in overall mortality; evidence in driven mainly by SDA results and effect of vegetarian diet in other cohorts is unproven.
18. Le I.T, Sabate J. Beyond meatless, the health effects of vegan diets: findings from the Adventists Cohorts. Nutrients 2014; 6:2131-47. Systematic review of 13 articles based on 3 prospective cohorts – Adventist Mortality Study, Adventist Health Study, and Adventist Health Study-2 – reporting clearly defined dietary patterns as exposures and comparing vegetarians (about 50% [8% vegans]) to non-vegetarians (50%) for cardiometabolic factors, cancer-related sites, and/or mortality. Compared to omnivorous diets, vegetarians (including vegans) had reduced odds of hypertension (55%), diabetes (49%), metabolic syndrome* (56%), colon cancer (45-51%), GI cancer (23%), all-cause mortality (12-20%), and cardiovascular mortality for men only (29%); overall cancer rates reduced by 7-8% but not statistically significant (95% CI, -3 to 19%). A subgroup analysis comparing lacto-ovo-vegetarians to vegans showed that vegan diets offer additional protection for obesity, hypertension, type-2 diabetes, and cardiovascular mortality; in one study, vegans had 73% higher odds of urinary tract cancer. (*metabolic syndrome defined as having at least 3 of the following 5 conditions: abdominal obesity, high blood pressure, high blood sugar, high serum triglycerides, and low HDL levels)

19. Lopez PD, Cativo EH, Atlas SA, Rosendorff C. The effect of vegan diets on blood pressure in adults: a meta-analysis of randomized controlled trials. Am J Med 2019; doi.org/10.1016/j.amjmed.2019/01.044. Systematic review of 11 randomized, controlled trials with 983 participants, showing that a vegan diet, compared to “any less restrictive diet,” did not reduce systolic or diastolic blood pressure; subgroup analysis of studies with baseline hypertension (systolic BP ≥ 130 mm Hg) showed small decreases in systolic BP (-4.10 mm Hg, P=0.047) and diastolic BP (-4.01 mm Hg, P<0.001).


21. Namazi N, Sanei P, Larjiani B, Esmailzadeh A. Soy product consumption and the risk of all-cause cause, cardiovascular, and cancer mortality: a systematic review and meta-analysis of cohort studies. Food Funct 2018; 23:2576-88. Systematic review of 7 studies with 627,209 participants and 39,250 deaths in 7 to 18 years of follow-up. No significant associations were found between a high intake of soy products and all-cause, cardiovascular, and cancer mortality.


23. Poulson NB, Lambert MNT, Jeppesen PB. The effect of plant derived bioactive compounds on inflammation: a systematic review and meta-analysis. Mol Nutr Food Res 2020; 64: e2000473. doi: 10.1002/mnfr.202000473. Systematic review of 16 RCTs (12 parallel group, 4 crossover) with 1,161 participants who were healthy or had comorbidities (e.g., overweight, diabetes, metabolic syndrome, high cholesterol). Plant-based diets and products (oils, such as flaxseed, grapeseed, rapeseed, corn, olive, safflower) significantly reduced C-reactive protein overall, and in diabetic, obese, and overweight patients. Small to moderate effect sizes with high heterogeneity.


person-years of data) and 58 clinical trials (4,635 adult participants) comparing the highest vs. lowest consumption of whole grains and carbohydrates rich in fiber. Observational studies showed a 15-30% decrease for the highest consumers in all-cause and cardiovascular related mortality, and incidence of coronary heart disease, stroke incidence and mortality, type 2 diabetes, and colorectal cancer. Clinical trials showed that the highest consumers had significantly lower body weight, systolic blood pressure, and total cholesterol. Consuming 25-29 grams of fiber daily conferred greatest risk reduction and dose-response curves showed that higher consumption could protect against cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, colorectal and breast cancer. Certainty of evidence was moderate for fiber outcomes and low to moderate for whole grains.

26. Schwinschakl L, Schwedhelm C, Hoffmann G, et al. Food groups and risk of all-cause mortality: a systematic review and meta-analysis of prospective studies. Am J Clin Nutr 2017; 105:1462-73. Systematic review of 102 studies of association between 12 nutrient groups and all-cause mortality (studies: whole grains 19, refined grains 4, vegetables 37, fruits 34, nuts 16, legumes 17, egg consumption 8, dairy products 25, fish 37, red meat 10, processed meat 7, and sugar-sweetened beverages (SSB) 5). The risk of all-cause mortality decreased with increasing intake (for each daily serving of whole grains (RR 0.92), vegetables (RR 0.96), fruits (RR 0.94), nuts (RR 0.76), and fish (RR 0.93). Conversely, mortality increased with higher intake of red meat (RR 1.10) and processed meat (RR 1.23). Dairy products increased mortality in a non-linear fashion, with no detrimental effects for intake up to 750 g/d but a 15% increased risk of mortality above this level. Refined grains and SSBs did not show significant relations.

27. Segovia-Siapco G, Sabaté J. Health and sustainability outcomes of vegetarian dietary patterns: a revisit of the EPIC-Oxford and the Adventist Health Study-2 cohorts. Eur J Clin Nutr. 2018 Oct 2. doi: 10.1038/s41430-018-0310-z. Narrative review comparing 2 ongoing, longitudinal studies with large proportions of vegetarians (essentially no meat intake, but some fish), with new emphasis on sustainability. Risk for all cancers was 16% lower in AHS-2 study for vegans and 11-19% lower in EPIC-Oxford and fish-eaters; morbidity and chronic diseases were overall lower in vegetarians. Greenhouse gas emissions of equicaloric diets were 29% less in vegetarian diet in AHS-2 and 47-60% less for vegetarian/vegan diets in EPIC-Oxford than non-vegetarian/meat-eating diets. Conclude that the beneficial health outcomes and reduced carbon footprints make the case for adopting vegetarian diets to address global food supply and environmental sustainability.

28. Soedamah-Muthu SS, de Goede J. Dairy consumption and cardiometabolic diseases: systematic review and updated meta-analyses of prospective cohort studies. Current Nutrition Reports 2018; 7:171-82. Update of a 2011 meta-analysis (17 studies) with 9 newer studies. Total dairy and low-fat dairy reduced the risk of diabetes by 3 to 4%, with a larger impact for yogurt (relative risk 0.86, 95% CI 0.83 to 0.90). Total dairy and milk were not associated with coronary heart disease.


31. Valli C, Rabassa M, Johnston BC, et al. Health-related values and preferences regarding meat consumption: a mixed-methods systematic review. Ann Int Med 2019. Doi:10.7326/M19-1326. Qualitative review of 41 quantitative and 13 qualitative studies that concluded, based on low-certainty evidence with limited generalizability, that omnivores (a) consider meat an essential component of a healthy diet (18 studies), (b) enjoy eating meat (13 studies), (c) have low willingness to reduce their meat consumption (9 studies), and (d) lack the skills needed to prepare satisfactory meals without meat (7 studies). Vegetarians and low meat consumers reported health as 1 of the main reasons for not eating meat (23 studies).
32. Yokoyama Y, Levin SM, Barnard ND. Association between plant-based diets and plasma lipids: a systematic review and meta-analysis. Nutr Rev 2017; 75:683-98. Systematic review of 30 observational studies and 19 clinical trials assessing association of plant-based diets (for at least 4 weeks) and plasma lipids. Compared to omnivorous diets, plant-based diets lowered total cholesterol (mean difference, 95% CI: 0.30 mmol/L, P<0.001) and LDL cholesterol (95% CI: 0.30 mmol/L, P<0.001), but no differences in triglycerides.

33. Yokoyama Y1, Nishimura K2, Barnard ND3, et al. Vegetarian diets and blood pressure: a meta-analysis. JAMA Intern Med. 2014; 174:577-87. Systematic review of 7 clinical trials (311 adults) and 32 observational studies (21,604 adults) assessing the change in blood pressure (BP) after plant-based diet as an exposure or intervention. In the clinical trials, vegetarian diets increased systolic BP by 4.8 mm Hg (95% CI, 3.1 to 6.6) and diastolic BP by 2.2 mm Hg (95% CI, 1.0 to 3.5). In the observational studies, the mean systolic BP reduction was 6.9 mm Hg (95% CI, 4.7 to 9.1) and the diastolic reduction was 4.7 mm Hg (95% CI, 3.1 to 6.3).

34. Wang F, Zheng J, Yang B, et al. Effects of vegetarian diets on blood lipids: a systematic review and meta-analysis of randomized controlled trials. J Am Heart Assoc 2015; 4:10:e002408. doi: 10.1161/JAHA.115.002408. Systematic review of 11 clinical trials with 832 participants that randomized participants to a vegetarian vs. omnivore diet and assessed blood lipids. Vegetarian diets lowered blood concentrations of total cholesterol by 0.36 mmol/L (95% CI, 0.17 to 0.55), LDL cholesterol by 0.34 mmol/L (95% CI, 0.11 to 0.57), and HDL cholesterol by 0.30 (95% CI, 0.10 to 0.50). There was no impact of diet on blood triglyceride levels.

35. Wu J, Zeng R, Huang J, et al. Dietary protein sources and incidence of breast cancer: a dose-response meta-analysis of prospective studies. Nutrients 2016; 8,730; doi:10.3390/nu8110730. Systematic review of 46 prospective studies. High soy consumption reduced the risk of breast cancer by 8% relative to low soy consumption in 10 studies with 452,916 participants (relative risk 0.92, 95% CI 0.84 to 1.00). A linear association was observed between soy food intake and decreased breast cancer risk. In contrast, total red meat intake increased breast cancer risk by 7% in 8 studies with 691,383 participants (relative risk 1.07, 95% CI 1.01 to 1.07). No associations were found for poultry, fish, egg, nuts, total milk, and whole milk intake.

Randomized Controlled Trials of Plant-based Diets vs. Alternatives

Overweight or obese samples


2. Hall KD, Guo J, Courville AB, et al. Effect of plant-based, low-fat diet versus and animal-based, ketogenic diet on ad libitum energy intake. Nat Med 2021; 27:344-53. (NB: “ad libitum” mean “as much or as often as necessary or desired”). 20 adults, mean age 30y with BMI 28, randomized to consume ad libitum a minimally processed, plant-based low-fat diet (10% fat, 75% carbohydrate) vs. minimally processed, animal-based ketogenic, low-carbohydrate diet (76% fat, 10% carbohydrate with low glycemic load for 2 weeks, then crossed over for 2 weeks. Low-fat diet let to 689 kcal/day less energy intake than the low-carbohydrate diet over 2 weeks (which was the opposite of traditional teaching, that high carbohydrate diets lead to excess insulin secretion, promoting fat accumulation and increased energy intake).

3. Kahleova H, Dort S, Holubkov R, Barnard ND. A plant-based high-carbohydrate, low-fat diet in overweight individuals in a 16-week randomized controlled trial: the role of carbohydrates. Nutrients 2018; 10:doi: 10.3390/nu10091302. 75 overweight adults without diabetes randomized to a plant-based high-carbohydrate, low-fat (vegan) diet vs. their current diet. Vegan diet had 6.5 kg more weight loss (95% CI, 4.1 to 8.9), 4.3 kg more fat reduction (95% CI, 3.2 to 5.4), and significantly reduced insulin resistance. Increased carbohydrate intake (as a percentage of energy) correlated significantly (P<.001) with reduced body mass index (r 0.53), fat mass (r 0.55), visceral...

5. Sofi F, Dinu M, Pagliai G, et al. Low-calorie vegetarian versus Mediterranean diets for reducing body weight and improving cardiovascular risk profile: CARDIVEG stud (Cardiovascular Prevention with Vegetarian Diet). Circulation 2018; 137:1103-1113. 118 overweight omnivores, with a low-to-moderate cardiovascular risk profile randomized to a lacto-ovo-vegetarian diet vs. a low-calorie Mediterranean diet for 3 months with a cross-over design. Both diets had similar reductions in body weight (1.8-1.9 kg), body mass index, and fat mass. The vegetarian diet was more effective in lowering LDL cholesterol but the Mediterranean diet was better for triglycerides.

6. Turner-McGrievy GM, Barnard ND, Scialli AR. A two-year randomized weight loss trial comparing a vegan diet to a more moderate low-fat diet. Obesity 2007; 15:2276-81. 64 overweight postmenopausal women randomized to vegan or National Cholesterol Education Program (NCEP) diet for 14 weeks. Vegan diet had significantly greater weight loss at 1 year (11 vs. 4 lbs) and 2 years (7 vs. 2 lbs), with additional benefits when combined with group support meetings.

7. Turner-McGrievy GM, Wirth MD, Shivappa N, et al. Randomization to plant-based dietary approaches leads to larger short-term improvements in dietary inflammatory index scores and macronutrient intake compared with diets that contain meat. Nutr Res 2015; 35:97-106. 64 overweight and obese adults (BMI 25-30) randomized to dietary instruction on vegan (n=12), vegetarian (13), pesco-vegetarian (13), semi-vegetarian (13), or omnivorous (12) diet for 6 months. Vegan diet compared to others showed greater improvements in fiber, carbohydrate, fat, saturated fat, cholesterol, and the Dietary Inflammatory Index scores at 2 and 6 months.

8. Turner-McGrievy GM, Davidson CR, Wingard EE, Wilcox S, Frongillo EA. Comparative effectiveness of plant-based diets for weight loss: a randomized controlled trial of five different diets. Nutrition 2015; 31:350-8. Reports a different endpoint (weight loss) on the same patients studied in the 2015 article by the first author in Nutrition Research (64 adults with BMI 25-50, 12 randomized to vegan diet, 12 omnivorous, and remainders different vegetarian). Vegan diet had greater weight loss than other groups at 6 months (-7.5% vs. -3.2%, P=.03) and bad greater decreases in fat and saturated fat (P<.05).

9. Wright N, Wilson L, Smith M, Duncan B, McHugh P. The BROAD study: a randomized controlled trial using a whole food plant-based diet in the community for obesity, ischaemic heart disease or diabetes. Nutrition & Diabetes 2018 Nov 2;8(1):58. doi: 10.1038/s41387-018-0067-4 found that the decrease in fat mass was associated with an increased intake of plant protein (r~-0.30, P=0.011) and decreased intake of animal protein (r+0.39, P=.001).

10. Asnicar F, Berry SE, Valdes AM, et al. Microbiome connections with host metabolism and habitual diet from 1,098 deeply phenotyped individuals. Secondary analysis of the PREDICT trial (Personalised Responses to Dietary Composition Trial), in which 1,098 healthy adults, age 18-65y, were randomized to standardized “test” meals vs. captured “free-living” non-standardized meals, to predict and individual’s metabolic response to foods based on their microbiome, meal composition, and meal context. Microbial biomarkers for obesity were reproducible and consistent with external cohorts and correlated with circulating blood metabolites that indicate cardiovascular disease. Moreover, the
microbiome associated with health dietary habits overlapped those associated with favorable cardiometabolic and postprandial markers, suggesting the microbiome could be stratified into generalizable health levels in individuals without clinically manifest disease.


12. Crimarco A, Springfeld S, Petlura C, et al. A randomized crossover trial on the effect of plant-based compared with animal-based meat on tremthylamine-N-oxide (TMAO) and cardiovascular disease risk factors in generally healthy adults: Study With Appetizing Plantfood – Meat Eating Alternative Trial (SWAP-MEAT). Am J Clin Nutr 2020; 112:1188-99. Study funded by unrestricted grant from Beyond Meat to Stanford University. Crossover trial of 36 adults randomized to 2 or more servings/day of plant vs. animal meat for 8 weeks, keeping other consumption stable. TMAO concentrations were significantly lower overall for plant vs. animal (2.7 vs. 4.7, P=.012), but only for the 18 participants who received plant second (after crossover) and not for those who received plant first; LDL cholesterol concentrations were also lower during the plant meat phase (110 vs. 121 mg/dL, P=.002).

13. Gardner CD, Coulston A, Chatterjee L, et al. The effect of a plant-based diet on plasma lipids in hypercholesterolemic adults: a randomized trial. Ann Intern Med 2005; 142:725-33. 120 adults (age 30-65 y) with LDL cholesterol of 130-190 mg/dL, and a BMI <31 with otherwise good health, randomized to a plant-based diet (low fat plus some added cheese and eggs) vs. low-fat diet with animal products (both diets had identical total fat, saturated fat, protein, carbohydrate, and cholesterol content) for 4 weeks; plant-based diet had greater effect in lowering total and LDL cholesterol (P=.02) but not on HDL or triglycerides.

14. Jakše B, Jakše B, Pajek J, Pajek M. Effects of ad libitum consumed low-fat, high-fiber plant-based diet supplemented with plant-based meal replacements on cardiovascular risk factors. Food Nutr Res 2019; May 21:63. doi: 10.29219/frn.v63.1560. eCollection 2019. Single-arm intervention trial of 36 adults on a traditional western-type diet switched to a whole food plant-based diet eaten ad libitum (as much as they wanted), including 2 plant-based meal replacements daily, for 10 weeks. Reductions seen in LDL cholesterol of 0.6 mmol/L (95% CI, 0.3 to 0.8, with similar decrease in non-HDL and total cholesterol. HDL cholesterol was reduced by 0.16 mmol/L (95% CI, 0.2 to 0.2).

Overweight (or obese) and high lipids/cholesterol

15. Jenkins DJ, Wong JM, Kendall CW, et al. The effect of a plant-based low-carbohydrate (“Eco-Atkins”) diet on body weight and blood lipid concentrations in hyperlipidemic subjects. Arch Intern Med 2009; 169:1046-54. 47 overweight hyperlipidemic adults randomized to a plant-based diet (carbohydrates 26%, vegetable protein 31%, vegetable oil 43%) vs. a lacto-ovo vegetarian diet (carbohydrates 58%, protein 16%, fat 25%) for 4 weeks. Plant-based group had greater reductions in LDL-C (-8.1%, P=.002), total cholesterol to HDL-C ratio (-8.7%, P=.004), and apolipoprotein B/A1 ratios (-9.6%, P=.001). Similar weight loss (about 8.8 lbs) in both groups.

16. Jenkins DJ, Wong JM, Kendall CW, et al. Effect of a 6-month vegan low-carbohydrate (“Eco-Atkins”) diet on cardiovascular risk factors and body weight in hyperlipidemic adults: a randomized controlled trial. BMJ Open 2014; 4:e0003505. doi: 10/1136/bmjopen-2013-003505. 39 overweight hyperlipidemic men and postmenopausal women randomized to a plant-based diet (carbohydrates 26%, vegetable protein 31%, vegetable oil 43%) vs. a lacto-ovo vegetarian diet (carbohydrates 58%, protein 16%, fat 25%) for 6 months. 23 completed the study (50% plant-based, 68% control) with similar weight loss (about 2 lbs), but plant-based group had greater reductions in LDL-C (P<.001), triglycerides (P=.005), total cholesterol to HDL-C ratio (P<.001), and apolipoprotein B:A1 ratios (P<.001).

Diabetic samples


19. Barnard ND, Jenkins CJ, Turner-McGrievy G, et al. A low-fat vegan diet and a conventional diabetes diet in the treatment of type 2 diabetes: a randomized, controlled, 74-wk clinical trial. Am J Clin Nutr 2009; 89:1588S-96S. 99 type 2 diabetics randomized to a low-fat vegan diet vs. control diet (American Diabetes Association) for 74 weeks. Both diets had sustained reductions in weight and plasma lipids. When controlling for medication changes, the low-fat vegan diet was better than the control diet in lowering Hb A1c (-0.4 vs. .01, P=.03), total cholesterol (-20.4 vs. -6.8 mg/dL, P=.01), and LDL cholesterol (-13.5 vs. -3.4 mg/dL, P=.03).

20. De Natale C, Annuzzi G, Bozzetto L, et al. Effects of a plant-based high-carbohydrate/high-fiber diet versus high-monounsaturated fat/low-carbohydrate diet on postprandial lipids in type 2 diabetic patients. Diabetes Care 2009; 32:2168-73. Randomized, crossover study of 18 type 2 diabetic patients (mean age 59, mean BMI 27) who followed either a plant-based high-carbohydrate & high fiber diet vs. a low-carbohydrate high in monounsaturated fats (e.g., red meat, whole milk, nuts, avocados) for 4 weeks, followed by crossover; plant-based diet significantly decreased postprandial plasma glucose, insulin responses, and glycemic variability, with additional positive effects on triglyceride-rich lipoproteins.

Coronary artery disease samples

21. Ornish D, Brown SE, Scherwitz LW, et al. Can lifestyle changes reverse coronary heart disease? The Lifestyle Heart Trial. Lancet 1990; 336:129-33. 28 adults with coronary artery disease (documented by angiography) randomized to low-fat (10%) vegetarian diet (egg whites and 1 cup of milk/yogurt per day allowed) with lifestyle interventions (stress management training, moderate exercise, smoking reduction, and group psychosocial support) vs. control group with no lifestyle changes for 1 year. Coronary angiography showed reduced stenosis diameter of 5.5% for intervention group vs. 7.4% increase for control group; overall, 82% of intervention group showed regression of coronary artery disease. Intervention group has greater decreases in total cholesterol (P=.019), LDL cholesterol (P=.007), and apolipoprotein B (P=.010) than control group.

22. Ornish D, Scherwitz LW, Billings, et al. Intensive lifestyle changes for reversal of coronary heart disease. JAMA 1998; 280:2001-7. 4-year extension of 1990 randomized trial in Lancet, now with 48 adults with moderate-severe coronary artery disease (documented by angiography). Primary outcome was stenosis seen on coronary angiography. Compared to the control group, the intervention group had greater reduction in stenosis at 1 year (4.5% improvement vs. 5.4% worsening, statistical significance not stated) and after 5 years (7.9% improvement vs. 27.7% worsening, P<.001). Risk ratio for cardiac events was higher for controls: RR=2.47 (95% CI, 1.48 – 4.20).

23. Shah B, Newman JD, Woolf K, et al. Anti-inflammatory effects of a vegan diet vs. the American Heart Association-recommended diet in coronary artery disease (EVADE CAD) trial. J Am Heart Assoc. 2018 Dec 4;7(23):e011367. doi: 10.1161/JAHA.118.011367. Randomized, open-label trial with blinded study endpoint of 100 adults (mean age 61 years, 85% male) with angiographically defined CAD (≥50% lesion in an artery with ≥2 mm caliber), without prior myocardial infarction or bypass surgery in prior 3 months, randomized to vegan vs. AHA-recommended diet for 8 weeks. Vegan group had 32% lower (95% CI, 6 to 51%) high-sensitivity C-reactive protein, an
inflammatory marker of risk for major adverse cardiovascular outcomes in CAD, and also had 13% reduction in LDL cholesterol (95% CI, 3 to 22%).

Cancer sample

24. Dewell A, Weidner G, Sumner MD, Chi CS, Ornish D. A very low-fat vegan diet increases intake of protective dietary factors and decreases intake of pathogenic dietary factors. J Am Diet Assoc 2008; 108:347-56. 93 patients with early-stage prostate cancer randomized to very low-fat (10%) vegan diet supplemented with soy protein and lifestyle changes vs. control group of usual care for 1 year. Vegan diet increased protective nutrients and phytochemicals (e.g., fiber from 31 to 59 grams/day) and decreased intake of dietary factors implicated in chronic diseases.

25. Jacka FN, O’Neil A, Opie R, et al. A randomized controlled trial of dietary improvement for adults with major depression (the ‘SMILES’ trial). BMC Med 2017; 15:23. DOI 10.1186/s12916-017-0791-y. Adults with moderate-severe depression (N=67) randomized to adjunctive nutritional counseling (7 sessions with clinical dietician) vs. social support protocol for 12 weeks. Diet emphasized whole grains, vegetables, fruits, legumes, nuts (raw, unsalted), olive oil (3 tbsp/day), eggs, low-fat dairy; some fish, chicken, lean red meat; diet restricted sweets, refined cereals, fried food, fast food, processed meats, sugar-sweetened beverages; allowed some red wine with meals. After 12 weeks, the Montgomery-Asberg Depression Rating Scale showed much larger improvement in diet group (Cohen’s d, -1.16), with 80% remission (vs. 32% for controls); number needed to treat for remission of 4.1

Multiple sclerosis sample

26. Yadav V, Marracci G, Kim E, et al. Low-fat plant-based diet in multiple sclerosis: a randomized controlled trial. Mult Scler Relat Disord 2016; 9:80-90. 61 patients with multiple sclerosis (mean age 42 years) randomized to a very low-fat plant-based diet or a wait-listed (control) group for 1 year. No difference seen in brain MRI outcomes, number of MS relapses, or disability at 12 months, but the plant-based diet group at 6 months showed reduced LDL cholesterol, total cholesterol, and fatigue scores.

Multi-morbidity samples

27. Klementova M, Thieme L, Haluzik M, et al. A plant-based gastrointestinal hormones and satiety more than an energy- and macronutrient processed-meat meal in T2D, obese, and healthy men: A three-group randomized crossover study. Nutrients 2019; 11(1). pii: E157. doi: 10.3390/nu11010157. Sixty men, aged 30-65 years, in 3 groups of 20 each (healthy, obese, and type 2 diabetes) were randomized to one of two meals matched for energy and micronutrients, either a processed-meat and cheese burger (M-meal) or a vegan meal with tofu (V-meal). GI hormones and satiety were assessed at 30, 60, 120, and 180 minutes after eating, and on the next day given the other meal with similar measurements. Repeated measures ANOVA showed increased satiety after the V-meal for all 3 groups: a 9% increase (95% CI, 4.4-13.6%) for diabetics, an 18.7% increase (95% CI, 12.8-24.6%) in obese men, and a 24.6% increase (95% CI, 18.2-31.7%) in healthy men. Gut hormones were also significantly higher after the V-meal in all groups.

28. Mishra S, Xu J, Agarwal U, Gonzales J, Levin S, Barnard ND. A multicenter randomized controlled trial of plant-based nutrition program to reduce body weight and cardiovascular risk in the corporate setting: the GEICO study. Eur J Clin Nutrition 2013; 67:718-24. 291 GEICO employees with BMI ≥ 25, type 2 diabetes, or both randomized to low-fat vegan diet vs. no dietary changes for 18 weeks. Compared to the control group, vegans had greater decrease in weight (6.5 vs. 1.0 lbs, P<.001), total cholesterol (8.0 vs. 0.01 mg/dL, P<.01), LDL cholesterol (8.1 vs. 0.9 mg/dL, P<.01), and HbA1c (0.6 vs. 0.08%, P<.01). Benefits of vegan diet were more pronounced in participants who completed the trial (66% of vegans, 78% of control group).

29. Wright N, Wilson I, Smith M, Duncan B, McHugh P. The BROAD study: a randomized controlled trial using a whole food plant-based diet in the community for obesity, ischemic heart disease, or diabetes. Nutr Diabetes 2017; 7(3):e256. doi: 10.1038/nutd.2017.3. 65 subjects aged 35-70 years who were overweight or obese and had at least 1 other chronic condition (type 2 diabetes, ischemic heart disease, hypertension, or high cholesterol) randomized to a whole-food plant-based diet (not energy restricted) plus twice-weekly facilitated meetings vs. no dietary
change for 6 months (75% completed the study). The plant-based group had 3.9 kg more reduction in body mass index (95% CI, 3.7 to 4.0) after 6 months, with little change at 12 months. The plant-based diet did not have a significant impact on total cholesterol levels.

Rheumatoid arthritis sample


Large Cohort Studies

China Health and Nutrition Survey


37. Li Q, Liu C, Zhang S, et al. Dietary carbohydrate intake and new-onset of hypertension: a nationwide cohort study in China. Hypertension. 2021;77:00-00. DOI: 10.1161/HYPERTENSIONAHA.120.16751. Analysis of 12,177 adults with no baseline hypertension (HTN), of whom 4,269 developed hypertension during 95,157 person-years of follow-up, with higher risk for animal vs. plant-based diets. U-shaped association of carbohydrate intake with HTN incidence, with lowest risk at 50-55% of diet; increased risk associated with more low-quality vs. high-quality carbohydrates. Supports intake of high-quality carbohydrate, and substituting plant-based products for low-quality carbohydrates, to prevent HTN.

The China Study

1. Campbell TC, Parpia B, Chen J. Diet, lifestyle, and the etiology of coronary artery disease: the Cornell China Study. Am J Cardiol 1998; 82:181-211. Studied of mortality data for >50 diseases (including 7 cancers, up to 400-fold variations in geographic incidence) from 6,500 adults in 65 counties and 130 villages in rural mainland China (about 27-year time span), conducted by Cornell University, Oxford University, and Chinese Academy of Preventive Medicine, and funded by NIH and ACS. Chinese diet is typically only 10% animal products and has 3 times higher fiber than Western diet. Coronary artery disease mortality rates were inversely associated with frequency of green vegetables (r=-0.43, P<.01) and monounsaturated fatty acids (r=-0.64, P<.001) but positively associated with salt intake/urinary sodium (r=0.42, P<.01) and plasma apolipoprotein B (r=0.37, P<.05). These apolipoproteins in turn were positively associated with meat intake (r=0.32, P<.01) and negatively associated with plant protein (r=-0.26, P<.05) and legume (r=-0.26, P<.05) intake. There was no evidence of a threshold beyond which further benefits did not accrue with increasing proportions of plant-based foods in the diet.

2. Campbell TC, Chen J. Diet and health in rural China: lessons learned and unlearned. Nutrition Today 1999; 34:116-23. Summary of the significant findings and rationale for the ecological, cross-sectional study (China Study) undertaken in 1983 in 65 Chinese countries to investigate association between dietary/lifestyle factors and widely varying (10- to 400-fold) localized cancer mortality rates. Chinese diet differed from Western diet in fat (15% vs. 30-45% total energy), dietary fiber (33 vs. 10-11 g/day), and total protein (10% vs. 15-20% of total calories) intakes. Recorded 367 characteristics of diet, medical conditions, lifestyle, and disease mortality. Found that cancers, cardiovascular disease, and diabetes clustered geographically (suggesting common causes), with the strongest correlation being total cholesterol. In turn, chief determinants of increased cholesterol were intakes of fat, animal protein, and meat. Intakes of legume protein and dietary fiber were associated with lowered cholesterol. Single-factor analyses showed positive associations of
lipids/fats/cholesterol with liver, colorectal, breast cancer (men and women) and all cancers (men only); and animal foods with colon cancer in men. Green vegetable intake had an inverse correlation with stomach and colon cancer. References are given to several spin-off publications with more detailed analyses.

**EPIC (European Prospective Investigation into Cancer and Nutrition) Study**

1. Davey GK, Spencer EA, Appleby PN, et al. EPIC – Oxford: lifestyle characteristics and nutrient intakes in a cohort of 33,883 meat-eaters and 31,546 non meat-eaters in the UK. Public Health Nutrition 2002; 6:259-68. Describes the EPIC-Oxford cohort as part of the European Prospective Investigation into Cancer, a cohort of over 500,000 adults recruited from 10 European countries in the 1990s. The EPIC-Oxford cohort focuses on dietary and lifestyle characteristics of 4 diet groups (N=65,429): meat-eaters (n=33,883), fish-eaters (n=10,110), lacto-ovo vegetarians (n=18,840), and vegans (n=2,596). Participants were categorized into a diet group based on responses to the following items in the questionnaire: (1) “Do you eat any meat (including bacon, ham, poultry, game, meat pies, sausages)?”; (2) “Do you eat any fish?”; (3) “Do you eat any dairy products (including milk, cheese, butter, yogurt)?”; and, (4) “Do you eat any eggs (including eggs in cakes and other baked foods)?” This study describes the cohort; subsequent publications give specific results.

2. Appleby PN, Davey GK, Key TJ. Hypertension and blood pressure among meat eaters, fish eaters, vegetarians, and vegans in EPIC-Oxford. Public Health Nutrition 2002; 5:645-54. Self-reported hypertension found in 15% of male meat eaters, 12% of female meat eaters, 6% of male vegetarians, and 8% of female vegetarians. Blood pressure measurements in 11,000 subjects who did not report hypertension showed that vegans had lower systolic (4.2 and 2.6 mmHg) and diastolic (2.8 and 1.7 mmHg) results compared to male and female meat eaters, respectively.

3. Appleby PN, Crowe FL, Bradbury KE, Key TJ. Mortality in vegetarians and comparable nonvegetarians in the United Kingdom. Am J Clin Nutr 2016; 103:218-30. Analysis of 60,310 adults (34% vegetarian, 4% vegan) from the EPIC-Oxford study and Oxford Vegetarian Study (n=10,359) with 5,924 deaths in more than 1 million total years of follow-up. No difference in overall (all-cause mortality between vegetarians, vegans, regular meat eaters, low meat eaters, and fish eaters. Compared with regular meat eaters, vegetarians (including vegans) had 50% lower mortality from pancreatic cancer and cancers of the lymphatic/hematopoietic tissue. When participants were excluded if they had changed diet group at least once during follow-up in the early mortality analysis (because a change in diet could have been prompted by onset of illness), vegetarians/vegans 10% lower all-cause mortality, 20% lower mortality from malignant cancer, and 50-60% lower mortality from cancers of the lymphatic/hematopoietic tissue. No differences found between vegetarians and vegans.

4. Bradbury KE, Crowe FL, Appleby PN, et al. Serum concentrations of cholesterol, apolipoprotein A-I, and apolipoprotein B in a total of 1,694 meat-eaters, fish-eaters, vegetarians, and vegans. Eur J Clin Nutr 2014; 68:178-83. Cross-sectional analysis of 1,694 participants in the European Prospective Investigation into Cancer and Nutrition (EPIC-Oxford) cohort, including 422 vegans (matched on age and sex); vegans had lowest levels of total cholesterol and apolipoprotein B than all other dietary groups, with only a small amount of the differences explained by a lower BMI among vegans.

5. Spencer EA, Appleby PN, Davey GK, Key TJ. Diet and body mass index in 38,000 EPIC-Oxford meat-eaters, fish-eaters, vegetarians, and vegans. Int J Obes Relat Metab Disord 2003; 27:728-34. Age-adjusted mean BMI was highest for meat-eaters (24.4 men, 23.5 women) and lowest in vegans (22.5 men, 22.0 women). Half the observed difference was explained by differences in macronutrient intake (e.g., high BMI correlated with increased protein and decreased fiber), but less than 5% of differences were related to lifestyle factors (e.g., smoking, physical activity, education level).

6. Papier K, Appleby PN, Fensom GK, et al. Vegetarian diets and risk of hospitalization or death with diabetes in British adults: results from the EPIC-Oxford study. Nutrition Diabetes 2019; 9:7; doi 10/1038/s41387-019-0074-0. Prospective cohort of 45,314 adults free from diabetes at baseline followed a mean of 17.6 years, during which 1,224 cases of diabetes death/hospitalization occurred. Compared with regular meat-eaters (>50 g/day), low meat eaters (<50 g/day) were 37% less likely to develop diabetes (95% CI 25-46%), fish eaters 53% less likely (95% CI, 41-62%), and vegetarians 37% less likely (95% CI, 26-46%). The associations remained significant, but were substantially attenuated after adjusting for body mass index (BMI).
1. **Lifetime Risk Pooling Project**

Wilkins JT, Karmali KN, Huffman MD, et al. Data resource profile: the cardiovascular disease lifetime risk pooling project. Int J Epidemiol 2015; 1557-64. Although not undertaken with a primary intent of dietary analysis, baseline data is available on many of the included cohorts and has been used to analyze risk of incident cardiovascular disease (CVD) and all-cause mortality (see below). This dataset includes over 225,000 unique individuals from 20 prospective, community-based cohort studies (including Framingham) with long-term follow-up data collected between 1948-2010. Information about risk status, demographics, medications, health behaviors, smoking status assessed at baseline and in many studies with repeated measures and outcomes were ascertained using national databases, Medicare claims, and direct review of medical records.

2. Zhong VW, Van Horn L, Cornelis MC, et al. Associations of dietary cholesterol or egg consumption with incident cardiovascular disease (CVD) and mortality. JAMA 2019; 321:1081-95. Analysis of 29,615 participants from 6 cohorts (median 17.5y follow-up) with dietary information and no baseline CVD from the Lifetime Risk Pooling Project. Each additional 300 mg of dietary cholesterol/day was associated with an adjusted increase of 17% in CVD (95% CI, 2-26%) and 18% in all-cause mortality (95% CI, 10-26%). Each additional half an egg/day was associated with an adjusted increase of 6% in CVD (95% CI, 3-10%) and 8% in all-cause mortality (95% CI, 4-11%), but were no longer significant after adjusting for dietary cholesterol consumption. Recommend that dietary guidelines and updates consider the dose-response relationship of dietary cholesterol and eggs on CVD and all-cause mortality.

3. **NurtiNet-Santé Study**

Alles B, Baudry J, Mejean C, et al. Comparison of sociodemographic and nutritional characteristics between self-reported vegetarians, vegans, and meta-eaters from the NurtiNet-Santé Study. Nutrients 2017; 9:1023; doi:10.3390/nu9091023. Study of 93,823 French adults (96.6% meat-eaters, 2.5% vegetarians, 0.8% vegans), from a web-based cohort study launched in 2009. Participants completed 3 web-based 24-hour dietary records. Compared with meat-eaters, vegetarians had a higher educational level and were more likely to be female, younger, and self-employed. Vegetarians had the most balanced diets and better adherence to French dietary guidelines, whereas vegans had highest fiber intake (53% above 30g/day vs. 11% of meat-eaters and 28% of vegetarians), but also a higher prevalence of vitamin B12 inadequacy. Conclude that only self-reported vegetarians and vegans may meet nutritional recommendations.

4. Kane-Diallo A, Srour B, Sellem L, et al. Association between a pro plant-based dietary score and cancer risk in the prospective NutriNet-santé cohort. Int J Cancer 2018; 143(9):2168-2176. doi:10.1002/ijc.31593. Epub 2018 Aug 7. Prospective cohort of 42,544 adults aged 45y or older who complete at least 3 24-hour dietary records during the 1st year of follow-up, with 1,591 new cancer cases (including 487 breast, 243 prostate, 198 digestive, 68 lung) diagnosed during follow-up (2009-2016). A higher pro plant-based dietary score was associated with decreased overall cancer risk (hazard ratio 0.85, 95% CI 0.76 to 0.97), decreased digestive cancer risk (hazard ratio 0.68, 95% CI, 0.47 to 0.99), and decreased lung cancer risk (hazard ratio 0.47, 95% CI 0.25 to 0.90). There were no associations between dietary score and breast or prostate cancers.

**PREDIMED Study: Prevención con Dieta Mediterránea**
1. Martinez-González MA, Sánchez-Tainta A, Corella D, et al. A provegetarian food pattern and reduction in total mortality in the Prevención con Dieta Mediterránea (PREDIMED) study. Am J Clin Nutr 2014; 100(Suppl 1): 320S-8S. Prospective cohort of 7,216 participants (mean age 67 years), enrolled from 2003-2009, at high cardiovascular risk, received a validated 137-item food-frequency questionnaire at baseline then yearly for a median of 4.8 years (323 deaths: 76 cardiovascular, 130 cancer, 117 other). Fruit, vegetables, nuts, cereals, legumes, olive oil, and potatoes were positively weighted for the provegetarian food pattern (PFP, range 12-60 points); added animal fats, eggs, fish, dairy products, and meats or meat products were negatively weighted. A PFP ≥ 40 points reduced mortality when compared to a PFP < 30 points (adjusted hazard ratio 0.59, 95% CI 0.40 to 0.88); similar results were found when using updated information on diet (relative risk 0.59, 95% CI, 0.39 to 0.89).

PURE (Prospective Urban Rural Epidemiology) Study

1. Dehghan M, Mente A, Zhang X, et al. Associations of fats and carbohydrate intake with cardiovascular disease and mortality in 18 countries from five contents (PURE): a prospective study. Lancet 2017; 390:2050-62. Multi-national cohort study of 135,335 individuals aged 35-70 years without cardiovascular disease enrolled from 2003-13 from 18 low-, middle-, and high-income countries (7 geographical regions: North America/Europe, South America, Middle East, south Asia, China, southeast Asia, and Africa) with 5,796 total deaths (1,649 cardiovascular deaths) and 4,784 major cardiovascular events between 2003 and 2018 (median 7.4 years follow-up). Higher carbohydrate intake (5th quintile vs. 1st quintile) increased total mortality (hazard ratio 1.28, 95% CI 1.12 to 1.46), but no distinction was made between whole grains and refined carbohydrates (which predominate in low- and middle-income countries). Higher fat intake (5th quintile vs. 1st quintile) reduced total mortality (HR 0.77, 95% CI, 0.67 to 0.87) with similar findings for fat types (saturated, monounsaturated, and polyunsaturated). Total fat, saturated fat, and unsaturated fats were not associated with myocardial infarctions or cardiovascular mortality.

2. Dehghan M, Merite A, Rangarajan S, et al. Association of dairy intake with cardiovascular disease and mortality in 21 countries from five continents (PURE): a prospective cohort study. Lancet 2018; 392:2288-97. Multi-national cohort study of 136,384 individuals aged 35-70 years without cardiovascular disease from 21 low-, middle-, and high-income countries (originally 18, but 3 joined later), with 10,567 major cardiovascular events or mortalities between 2003 and 2018. Higher dairy intake >2 servings per day compared to no intake was associated with lower risk of composite mortality/events (hazard ratio 0.84, 95% CI 0.75 to 0.94 for all dairy; HR 0.71, 95% CI 0.60 to 0.83 if only whole fat dairy), total mortality (HR 0.83, 95% CI, 0.72 to 0.96), non-cardiovascular mortality (HR 0.86, 95% CI 0.72 to 1.02), and stroke (HR 0.66, 95% CI 0.53 to 0.82). Higher milk intake >1 serving per day vs. no intake was associated with lower composite mortality/events (HR 0.90, 95% CI, 0.82 to 0.99) and yogurt intake >1 serving per day also had lower composite mortality/events (HR 0.86, 95% CI 0.75 to 0.99). No significant associations found between outcomes and higher intakes of butter or cheese.

3. Miller M, Mente A, Dehghan M, et al. Fruit, vegetable, and legume intake, and cardiovascular disease and deaths in 18 countries (PURE): a prospective cohort study. Lancet 2017; 390:2037-49. Multi-national cohort study of 135,335 individuals aged 35-70 years without cardiovascular disease from 18 low-, middle-, and high-income countries (7 geographical regions: North America/Europe, South America, Middle East, south Asia, China, southeast Asia, and Africa) with 5,796 total deaths (1,649 cardiovascular deaths) and 4,784 major cardiovascular events between 2003 and 2018 (median 7.4 years follow-up). Higher total fruit, vegetable, and legume intake was associated with lower total mortality (hazard ratio 0.81, 95% CI 0.68 to 0.96) and lower non-cardiovascular mortality (HR 0.84, 95% CI 0.68 to 1.04, P=0.004). Optimal benefit for total mortality seen with 3-4 servings per day (HR 0.78, 95% 0.69 to 0.88), with no change for higher consumption. Similar results for individual analyses of fruits, vegetables, and legumes, but raw vegetables had more benefits than cooked vegetables.

4. Mente A, O’Donnell M, Rangarajan S, et al. Urinary sodium excretion, blood pressure, cardiovascular disease, and mortality: a community-level prospective epidemiological cohort study. Lancet 2018; 392:496-506. Multi-national cohort study (PURE) of 93,767 adults age 35-70 years, without cardiovascular disease, from 18 countries. Sodium intake increased the risk of cardiovascular disease and strokes only in communities where mean intake was greater than 5 g/day; no consistent associations seen below this consumption level.
Rotterdam Study

1. Alferink JJM, Erler NS, de Knegt RJ, et al. Adherence to a plant-based, high-fibre dietary pattern is related to regression of non-alcoholic fatty liver disease (NAFLD) in an elderly population. Eur J Epidemiol 2020; 35:1069-85. Cohort of 963 elderly adults of whom 343 had NAFLD diagnosed by abdominal ultrasonography, with median 4.4y follow-up, during which 5% had new incident NAFLD and 30% had regression of baseline NAFLD. Adherence to a plant-based, high-fibre and low-fat diet was related to regression of NAFLD.

2. Chen Z, Zuurmond MG, van der Schaft N, et al. Plant versus animal-based diets and insulin resistance, prediabetes, and type 2 diabetes: the Rotterdam Study. Eur J Epidemiol 2018; 33:883-93. Long-term follow-up study of 6,798 adults (mean age 63 years) in a prospective, population-based cohort study with dietary intake data collected at baseline and 3 sub-cohorts (1989-93, 2000-01, and 2006-08). A continuous plant-based dietary index (PBDI), range 0-92, was used to assess adherence to a plant-based vs. animal-based diet. After adjusting for lifestyle and sociodemographic factors, a higher PBDI was associated with lower insulin resistance, lower prediabetes risk (hazard ratio 0.89, 95% CI 0.81 to 0.98), and lower type 2 diabetes risk (hazard ratio 0.82, 95% CI 0.73 to 0.92). After additional adjustment for body mass index, the association with insulin resistance remained significant but not for prediabetes risk.

3. Chen Z, Schoufour JD, Rivadeneira F, et al. Plant-based diet and adiposity over time in a middle-aged and elderly population: the Rotterdam Study. Epidemiology. 2018 Nov 30. doi: 10.1097/EDE.0000000000000961. Follow-up of 9,633 adults, with data collection (anthropometrics and body composition) every 3 to 5 years from 1989 to 2016 (median 7.1 years), showed that participants with a 10 point higher score on the plant-based dietary index score (range 0 to 92) a lower BMI by 0.70 kg/m over the study period (95% CI 0.59 to 0.81), lower waist circumference by 2.0 cm (95% CI, 1.7 to 2.3), lower fat mass index by 0.66 kg/m (95% CI, 0.52 to 0.80), and lower body fat percentage by 1.1 points (95% CI 0.84 to 1.10).

Seventh-Day Adventist Cohort Studies

4. [Adventist Mortality Study]. Kahan HA, Phillips RL, Snowdon DA, Choi W. Association between reported diet and all-cause mortality. Twenty-one year follow-up on 27,530 adult Seventh-day Adventists. Am J Epidemiol 1984; 119:775-87. Long-term follow-up on original study conducted between 1960 and 1966, by matching food consumption at beginning of study with death certificates for 1960 to 1980. All-cause mortality was significantly reduced with green salad consumption and increased for eggs and meat, when adjusted for age, sex, smoking history, history of major chronic disease, and age at initial exposure to the Adventist Church. This is one of many studies that have been published based on this cohort.

5. [Adventist Health Study 1]. Beeson WL, Mills PK, Phillips RL, Andress M, Fraser GE. Chronic disease among Seventh-day Adventists, a low-risk group: rationale, methodology and description of the population. Cancer 1989; 64:570-81. Describes cohort of 34,198 Adventists (55% lacto-ovo-vegetarian) age 30y or older, enrolled in 1976 and followed for 6 years, with reports on all-cause mortality for 8 years (1975-82) and incident cancers and ischemic heart disease (1977-82). Subsequent analyses give specific findings based on dietary patterns (e.g., vegan vs. vegetarian vs. omnivorous).


7. Orlich MJ, Singh PN, Sabate J, et al. Vegetarian dietary patterns and mortality in Adventist Health Study 2. JAMA Intern Med 2013; 173:1230-8. Analysis of 2,570 deaths from a subset of 73,308 participants from the AHS-2 study (mean follow-up 5.8 years) should 12% decrease in adjusted all-cause mortality (95% CI, 3-20%) for all vegetarians vs. nonvegetarians. Greater decrease for men (18%, 95% CI, 6-28%) than for women (7%, -5 to 18%). Vegetarian diets also had lower cardiovascular mortality, noncardiovascular noncancer mortality, renal mortality, and
Singapore Chinese Health Study

1. Hankin JH, Stram DO, Arakawa K, et al. Singapore Chinese Health Study: development, validation, and calibration of the quantitative food frequency questionnaire. Nutr Cancer. 2001; 39:187–195. Describes the cohort of 63,257 Chinese persons aged 45–74 years (citizens or permanent residents) enrolled between 1993 and 1998, with in-person interviews at recruitment to collect information on habitual diet (165-item food frequency questionnaire), demographic factors, height, weight, tobacco use, physical activity, female menstrual and reproductive, history, and medical history. The first and second follow-up interviews were conducted by telephone calls made during 1999–2004 and 2006–2010, respectively, with a participation rate of 89.9% for the first follow-up and 81.9% for the second follow-up.

2. Chen GC, Koh WP, Neelakantan N, et al. Dietary quality indices and risk of type 2 diabetes mellitus: the Singapore Chinese Health Study. Am J Epidemiol 2018; 187; 12: DOI: 10.1093/aje/kwy183. Subset of 45,411 adults (aged 45-74 years) from the Singapore Chinese Health Study – who were free of diabetes, cancer, and cardiovascular disease at baseline (1993-1998) – followed through 2010 (median 11.1 years) for type 2 diabetes diagnosis. Dietary pattern scores for the highest vs. lowest quintile showed reduced incidence of diabetes for the alternate Mediterranean diet (aMED) of 16% (95% CI, 8-23%) for the Alternate Healthy Eating Index 2010 of 21% (95% CI, 13-27%), for the Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension (DASH) diet of 29% (95% CI, 21-35%), an overall plant-based index of 6% (95% CI, 3-8%), and for a healthful plant-based index of 7% (95% CI, 5-10%).

3. Wu J, Song X, Chen GC, et al. Dietary pattern in midlife and cognitive impairment in late life: a prospective study in Chinese adults. Am J Clin Nutr. 2019 Aug 2. pii: nqz150. doi: 10.1093/ajcn/nqz150. [Epub ahead of print]. Cohort of 16,498 adults from the Singapore Health Study aged 45-74 years at baseline (1993-1998) re-interviewed at a 3rd follow-up visit about 20 years later (2014-2016). Cognitive impairment was present in 14.4% of participants (using the Mini-Mental State Examination) and was consistently lower for highest vs. lowest quintile of healthy dietary patterns: 33% lower with a Mediterranean diet index (95% CI, 23-41%), 25% for the Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension (DASH) diet (95% CI, 15-34%), 18% for the Alternate Healthy Eating Index (95% CI, 6-29%), and 22% lower for the healthy plant-based diet index (95% CI, 10-32%). Overall, a 1 standard deviation increase in diet quality scores was associated with 7-16% lower risk of cognitive impairment.

Tzu Chi Health Study, Taiwan

1. Chang CM, Chiu THT, Chang CC, Ming-Nan I, Lin CI. Plant-based diet, cholesterol, and risk of gallstone disease: a prospective study. Nutrients 2019, 11, 335; doi:10.3390/nu11020335. Analysis of 4,839 participants with 29,295 person-years of follow-up from the Tzu Chi Health Study, which included 6,002 participants (ages 18-87 years) recruited from 2007-2009, primarily (77%) from a Buddhist Hospital. A Food Frequency Questionnaire and dietary questionnaire were used to assess intake and participants were encouraged, but not required, to become vegetarians. Vegetarian diet reduced risk of symptomatic gallstone disease by 48% in women (HR 0.52, 95% CI, 0.28-0.96), but not in men, compared with non-vegetarian diet, adjust for age, education, smoking, alcohol, physical activities, diabetes, kidney diseases, BMI, lipid-lowering medication, and hypercholesterolemia. Women non-vegetarians with high cholesterol had 3.8 times risk of gallstone disease (HR 3.81, 95% CI 1.61-9.01) compared with vegetarians with normal cholesterol.

2. Chiu THT, Chang CC, Lin CL, Lin MN. A vegetarian diet is associated with a lower risk of cataract, particularly among individuals with overweight: a prospective study. J Acad Nutr Diet 2020; Dec 11;S2212-2672(20)31428-3. doi: 10.1016/j.jand.2020.11.003. Cohort of 4,450 adults from the Tzu Chi Health Study, age 40y or older and without cataracts at recruitment, followed 5-7 years with 476 incident cases of cataracts with 25,103 person-years of follow-up. Vegetarian diet had adjusted 20% reduced cataract risk (HR 0.80, 95% CI, 0.65 to 0.99, P<.04); more pronounced if overweight (HR 0.70, 95% CI 0.50 to 0.99, P=.04).

US Healthcare Worker Studies (Nurses and Health Professionals)

1. Baden MY, Liu G, Satija A, et al. Changes in plant-based diet quality and total and all cause-specific mortality. Circulation 2019; 140:979-91. Cohort of 49,407 women from the Nurses’ Health and 25,907 men from the Health Professionals Follow-Up Study, free from cardiovascular disease (CVD) and cancer in 1998, followed through 2014 (90% follow-up), during which there were 10,686 deaths (2,046 CVD, 3,091 cancer). Compared with participants whose plant-based diet indices (PDIs) were stable, those with a more healthful PDI had 10% lower total mortality (95% CI, 5-15%) and those with an unhealthful PDI had 12% higher mortality (95% CI, 7-18%). For CVD, a healthful PDI lowered mortality by 9% (95% CI, 4-14%) and an unhealthful PDI increased mortality by 8% (95% CI, 2-14%). No consistent associations were seen between PDIs and cancer mortality.

2. Chen Z, Drouin-Chartier JP, Li Y, et al. Changes in plant-based diet indices and subsequent risk of type 2 diabetes in women and men: three U.S. prospective cohorts. Diabetes Care 2021; 44:663-71. Prospective cohort of 76,530 women in Nurses' Health Study (NHS), 81,569 in NHS II, and 34,468 men in the Health Professionals Follow-Up Study, with 12,627 cases of type 2 diabetes documented in 2,955,350 person-years of follow-up. Those with the largest decrease (>10%) in the Plant-based Diet Index and the healthful PDI over 4 years had 12-23% higher diabetes risk in subsequent 4 years (adjusted for alcohol, smoking, physical activity, BMI, and other factors). Weight changes accounted for 6-36% of the associations between changes in PDIs and diabetes risk.

3. Satija A, Bhupathiraju SN, Spiegelman D, et al. Healthful and unhealthful plant-based diets and the risk of coronary artery heart disease in US adults. J Am Coll Cardiol 2017; 70:411-422. Pooled analysis of 73,710 women from the Nurses’ Health Study (1984-2012), 92,329 women from the Nurses’ Health Study 2 (1986-2012), and 43,259 men in the Health Professionals follow-up study (1986-2012) who were free of chronic disease at baseline. A plant-based diet index (PDI) score was created, with higher scores for healthy plant foods (e.g., whole grains, fruits, vegetables, nuts, legumes, oils) and lower scores for less healthy foods (juices, sweetened beverages, refined grains, potatoes, fried food, sweets) and for animal foods. There were 8,631 coronary heart disease (CHD) incidents over 4.8 million person-years of follow-up. A high PDI reduced risk of CHD by 25% (hazard ratio 0.75, 95% CI 0.68 to 0.83, p trend <.001) and a low (unhealthy) PDI increased risk by 32% (HR 1.32, 95% CI 1.20 to 1.46, p trend <.001). Conclude that higher plant-based intake substantially lowers CHD risk.

4. Satija A, Bhupathiraju SN, Rimm EB, et al. Plant-based dietary patterns and incidence of type 2 diabetes in US men and women: results from three prospective cohort studies. PLoS Med 2016; 14:13(6):e1002039. Pooled analysis of 69,949 women from the Nurses’ Health Study (1984-2012), 90,239 women from the Nurses’ Health Study 2 (1991-2011), and 40,539 men from the Health Professionals Follow-Up Study (1986-2010) who were free of chronic disease from baseline. A plant-based diet index (PDI) score was created, with higher scores for healthy plant foods (e.g., whole grains, fruits, vegetables, nuts, legumes, oils) and lower scores for less healthy foods (juices, sweetened beverages, refined grains, potatoes, fried foods, sweets) and for animal foods. There were 16,162 new cases of type 2 diabetes during 4.1 million person-years of follow-up. Looking at extreme deciles, a high PDI reduced incidence of type 2 diabetes by 49% (hazard ratio 0.51, 95% CI, 0.47 to 0.55, p trend <.001) and a low (unhealthy) PDI increased risk by 21-86% in the first cohort and a 39% lower risk in the second (95% CI, 12-59%).
16% (HR 1.16, 95% CI 1.08 to 1.25, p trend <.001). The impact of a high PDI on diabetes decreased from 49% to 20% after adjusting for body-mass index; the impact of an unhealthy PDI was unchanged. Conclude that higher plant-based intake substantially lower risk of developing type 2 diabetes.

5. Satija A, Malik V, Rimm EB, et al. Changes in intake of plant-based diets and weight change: results from 3 prospective cohort studies. Am J Clin Nutr 2019 May 25. pii: nqz049. doi: 10.1093/ajcn/nqz049. [Epub ahead of print]. Pooled analysis of 126,982 adults from the Nurses’ Health Study (NHS), NHS2, and the Health Professionals Follow-Up Study assessed for weight gain over 4 years (about 1.5 kg). After adjusting for other lifestyle factors, a 1-SD in plant-based diet index (PDI) emphasizing healthy foods (whole grains, fruits/vegetables, nuts/legumes, vegetable oils, tea/coffee) resulted in 0.68 kg less weight gain (95% CI, 0.66-0.69, P<.001), but an unhealthy PDI (refined grains, potato/fries, sweets, sweetened drinks/juices) resulted in 0.36 kg more weight gain (95% CI, 0.34 to 0.37, P<.001).

6. Song M, Fung TT, Hu FB, et al. Association of plant protein intake with all-cause and cause-specific mortality. JAMA Int Med 2016; 176:1453-63. Analysis of 131,342 participants (65% women, mean age 49 years) from the Nurses’ Health Study (121,700 US female nurses from 1980 to 2012) and the Health Professionals Follow-up Study (51,529 US male health professional from 1986-2012). Participants rated by survey every 2 years how often, on average, they consumed standard portions of different foods in the prior year, from which the investigators calculated protein (animal vs. plant) as percent of total energy consumption. For participants with at least 1 unhealthy lifestyle factor (e.g., smoking heavy alcohol, overweight/obesity, physical inactivity) a higher plant protein intake significantly reduced all-cause mortality and cardiovascular mortality (adjusted for lifestyle and dietary risk) and a higher animal protein intake significantly increased cardiovascular mortality (but not all-cause mortality). When 3% of animal protein was replaced with plant protein, all-cause mortality fell by 34% if processed red meat was replaced, 19% when eggs were replaced, and 12% when unprocessed red meat was replaced.

Miscellaneous Cohort Studies

1. Keaver L, Ruan M, Chen F, et al. Plant- and animal-based diet quality and mortality among US adults: a cohort study. Br J Nutr 2020 Sep 18;11-11. doi: 10.1017/S0007114520003670. Cohort of 36,825 US adults in the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey 1999-2014 with median 8.3y follow-up with 4,669 all-cause deaths (798 from heart disease, 1,021 from cancer). Calculated 3 Diet Quality Indices (DQI): comprehensive (cDQI), plant-based (pDQI), and animal based (aDQI). Highest quartile of cDQI had 25% lower all cause mortality (HR 0.75, 95% CI 0.65 to 0.86), largely due to reduced mortality from highest vs. lowest quartile pDQI (HR 0.66, 95% CI, 0.38 to 0.74); no independent association found for the quality of animal foods (aDQI) and mortality.

2. Kim H, Lee K, Rebholz CM, Kim J. Plant-based diets and incident metabolic syndrome (MetS): results from a South Korean prospective cohort study. PLoS Med. 2020;17:e1003371. doi:10.1371/journal.pmed.1003371. NB: Metabolic syndrome (MetS) is centripetal obesity plus HTN, high blood sugar, and high cholesterol/triglycerides (increases risk of stroke, heart disease, and type 2 diabetes). Cohort of 5,646 adults, age 40-69y without MetS or related chronic diseases at baseline, followed 8 years with 2,583 cases of MetS; 50% higher risk for highest vs. lowest quintile of unhealthy plant-based diet index (refined carbohydrates, sugars, salty foods) (HR 1.50, 95% CI 1.311.71), decreasing slightly when adjusted for BMI.


Korean adults 40 or older, without baseline dyslipidemia or related chronic diseases, drawn from the Korean Genome and Epidemiology Study (10,030 participants) followed for 14 years, during which 2,995 incident dyslipidemia cases occurred. Strong associations of dyslipidemia with unhealthy plant-based diet index (lowest vs. highest quintile, hazard ratio 0.63) and with unhealthy plant-based diet index (HR 1.48); health plant-based index was associated with lower risk for all lipid disorders.

5. Romanos-Nanclares A, Toledo E, Sanchez-Bayona R, et al. Healthful and unhealthy provegetarian food patterns and the incidence of breast cancer: results from a Mediterranean cohort. Nutrition 2020; 79-80:110884. doi: 10.1016/j.nut.2020.110884. Cohort of 10,812 women in the Seguimiento Universidad de Navarra study followed median 11.5y with 101 incident breast cancer cases. Inconsistent associations of high- vs. low-quality provegetarian dietary patterns with breast cancer incidence; 45% lower incidence for tertile 2 vs. tertile 1 provegetarian dietary patterns (HR 0.55, 95% CI, 0.32 to 0.95), but no associations for highest tertile.

6. Shu X, Calvert JK, Cai H, et al. Plant and animal protein intake and risk of incident kidney stones: results from the Shanghai men’s and women’s health studies. J Urol. 2019 Aug 20;101097/JU0000000000000493. doi: 10.1097/JU.0000000000000493. [Epub ahead of print]. Follow-up of 2,653 adults showed that participants in the highest quintiles of animal and nondairy animal protein intake had increased risk for kidney stones compared to lower quintile (hazard ratio 1.16, 95% CI, 1.01 to 1.32). The highest intake quintiles of animal-to-plant protein ratios and nondairy animal-to-plant protein ratios had similar findings.

7. Yishahak SF, Hinkle SN, Mumford SL, et al. Vegetarian diets during pregnancy, and maternal and neonatal outcomes. In J Epidemiol 2021, 165-178. Cohort of 1,948 low-risk pregnant women with 32 vegetarians, 7 pesco-vegetarians, and 301 semi-vegetarians; full vegetarians had increased odds of neonates small for gestational age (adjusted OR 2.51, 95% CI, 1.01 to 6.21) but without any morbidity.


Intervention Studies Without a Comparison or Control Group

Coronary Artery Disease

1. Esselstyn CB Jr, Ellis SG, Medendorp SV, Crowe TD. A strategy to arrest and reverse coronary artery disease: a 5-year longitudinal study of a single physician’s practice. J Fam Pract 1995; 41:560-8. Cohort of 22 patients with angiographically documented, severe coronary artery disease who took cholesterol-lowering drugs and followed a plant-based diet with <10% fat. 5 patients dropped out within 2 years, 17 maintained the diet (mean 5.5 years follow-up). Cholesterol reduced from mean 246 mg/dl to 150 mg/dl. Of 25 cardiac lesions, 11 regressed and 14 remained stable. For the 11 subjects remaining after 10 years all had arrest of disease and none had new infarcts.

2. Esselstyn CB Jr. Updating a 12-year experience with arrest and reversal therapy for coronary hear disease. Am J Cardiol 1999; 84:339-41. Cohort of 24 adults (23 men, 1 woman) with severe, angiographically demonstrated coronary artery disease (but all non-smoking, non-hypertensive, non-diabetic) who agreed to follow a plant-based diets with <10% of calories from fat (no oil, but did allow skim milk and no-fat yogurt); 18 patients adhered to the diet and 6 were dropped from the study after 12-18 months. After 5 years, 11/18 in the adherent group had angiography, showing disease arrest in 100% and regression in 8 (73%). Adherent patients after 12 years had no extension of clinical disease, no coronary events, and no interventions, despite having 49 coronary events in the 8 years before the study. Mean total cholesterol was 145 mg/dl.

3. Esselstyn CB Jr, Gendy G, Doyle J, Golubic M, Roizen MF. A way to reverse coronary artery disease? J Fam Pract 2014; 63:63. Cohort study of 198 consecutive, self-selected nonsmoking adults (91% male) with multiple comorbidities (hyperlipidemia 161, hypertension 60, diabetes 23) who voluntarily asked for counseling in plant-based nutrition (whole-food, plant-based diet with no added oil, salt, sugar or processed foods) for disease treatment and were
followed for a mean of 44 months (patients were encouraged to exercise and were later asked to avoid caffeine and fructose). Patients who adhered (e.g., avoided all meat, fish, dairy, and added oils) to the diet (89%) did better than those who did not (11%) in terms of symptom reduction (94% vs. 0%), disease reversal (22% vs. 0%), and adverse events (0.6% vs. 62%) (e.g., sudden cardiac death, heart transplant, ischemic stroke, coronary artery bypass surgery). Although the results are impressive, generalizability is limited by self-selection, reliance on patient history for baseline conditions (e.g., no angiogram as in prior study), and telephone follow-up to assess outcomes and results.

Fibromyalgia


Rheumatoid arthritis

5. McDougall J, Bruce B, Spiller G, Westerdahl J, McDougall M. Effects of a very low-fat, vegan diet in subjects with rheumatoid arthritis. J Altern Complement Med 2002; 8:71-5. 24 patients (mean age 56 years) with moderate-to-severe rheumatoid arthritis (RA) placed on a low-fat (10%) vegan diet for 4 weeks. All measures of RA symptomatology decreased significantly, except for morning stiffness. CRP and RA factor decreased; ESR was unchanged.

Influential Books


✓ US population 1997: 300-500,000 vegans; about 0.11 to 0.19% population
✓ US population 2012: 2.5-6.0 million vegans; about 1-2% population (about 10-fold increase in 15 years)
✓ Other countries: Israel 5% vegans, UK 2%, Australia 1%, Germany 1%
✓ India: 31% vegetarians, but relatively few vegans

Google trends: Use of “vegan” as search term has increased 6-fold from 2004 to 2017, and 2-fold from just 2015 to 2017. Top search locations are Australia, Canada, New Zealand, US, and UK.

Quotations of Note


“The health benefits associated with whole plant-based foods are not sufficiently proven for many people. Thus I suggest that the evidence supporting the health value of a whole food diet be considered a hypothesis, not proven fact. For me, this evidence is more than convincing enough to make major decisions, public and private. Whether this evidence rises to the level of a traditionally defined ‘fact’ is not necessarily the right question. Very little traditionally produced biomedical research ever becomes unequivocal
fact because what is true for one set of experimental conditions may be different for other conditions…The narrower the scope of diets being investigated, the more compromised becomes the evidence supporting food guidelines for the larger population.”

“Among diet and health studies on large cohorts of people, virtually none of these cohorts, to date, have included individuals accustomed to using the whole food plant-based dietary lifestyle. Vegans and vegetarians approach the nutrition of this dietary lifestyle and, in doing so, are known to have lower mortality rates for non-communicable chronic diseases [Sobiecki JG, Nutr Res 2016; 36:464-77][Huang T, Ann Nutr Metab 2012; 60:233-40], but this cannot be the full expression of health effects because, according to the most robust dietary studies on vegans and vegetarians, the mean contents of total fat and sugar for vegans, vegetarians and meat eaters were the same, 30-31% fat and 22-23% sugar” [Sobiecki JG, Nutr Res 2016; 36:464-77].”

“There is still an abundance of evidence which supports, as a goal, the use of a diet wholly composed of whole food plant-based foods, without added oil or refined carbohydrates. Two kinds of evidence convincingly expose the need for dietary change and offer a solution to support this change. These are 1) breadth of effect [Campbell TMI, Primary Care Reports 2012; 18:25-35], and 2) reversal of disease [Esselstyn CB Jr, J Fam Pract 1995; 41:560-8 and Am J Cardiol 1999; 84:339-41][Ornish D, Lancet 1990; 336:129-33]. Breadth of effect evidence challenges the contemporary and popular concept of ‘targeted drug therapy,’ which encourages research and development of specific drugs for controlling specific diseases…Reversal of disease means using the same nutritional protocol to prevent and to treat disease, which challenges the use of pills and procedures to control disease. Both of these kinds of evidence are best appreciated when considering and appreciating the infinitely complex, dynamic and unknowable details of nutritional function.”