

## Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) *Plant-Based, Vegetarian, and Vegan Diets*

### What does it mean to eat a “plant-based” diet?

A 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). Whereas some use “plant-based” to indicate a diet based entirely on plant foods, we are using it here in terms of a relative excess, emphasis, or preponderance of plant foods over animal products in a person’s diet.

### How does a plant-based diet differ from a vegetarian diet?

A vegetarian diet is 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 (*pescoarian*) or poultry and fowl (*pollotarian*).

### What does it mean to eat a “semi-vegetarian” diet?

A semi-vegetarian diet is one that excludes some types of meat (most often red meat), but may contain other types (e.g., poultry or fish). For example, someone who avoids red meat but still eats fish and chicken would be a semi-vegetarian.

### What does it mean to eat a “flexitarian” diet?

This refers to a vegetarian-inclined diet that limits meat intake, but still includes meat, such as the Mediterranean and DASH (Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension) diets. The Mediterranean diet, for example, emphasizes whole plant foods, olive oil, and fish, but does allow meat “less often” than other foods. The DASH diet is similar in allowing some lean meat (plus fish and chicken) but places more limits on consuming oils and fats.

### Are plant-based diets the same as a vegan diet?

No, because a vegan diet is *exclusively* plant-based and does not include any animal products at all. In addition, vegans (people who eat vegan diets) often have ethical concerns about eating animals and are committed beyond dietary restrictions to not using any animal products such as leather, wool, or silk. In contrast, many other vegans follow a plant-based diet for its health benefits, not for ethical reasons. To maintain our focus on health, we prefer to use the term *plant-based diet* instead of *vegan diet*.

### What does it mean to eat a “whole-food” plant-based diet?

A whole-food, plant-based (WFPB) diet emphasizes unrefined plants (such as whole grains), and avoids refined plant foods that have been processed and stripped of their nutrients. For example, this type of diet *does not* include any added sugars, refined grains or flours, or any isolated (extracted) oils including so-called “heart healthy” oils like olive oil. Few research studies have compared whole-food plant-based diets to other types of plant-based diets, but there is growing evidence that (1) eating *only plants* is best and that (2) eating *whole foods* is better than eating refined foods.

### Is it best to eat a plant-based diet that is also gluten-free?

No, because avoiding gluten (a protein found in wheat, rye, and barley) is only necessary if you have wheat allergy, gluten sensitivity, or celiac disease. For people without these conditions, avoiding gluten in the diet is unnecessarily difficult and also deprives your body of whole grains that are full of fiber, protein, and minerals that benefit your health.



### How is this FAQ list different from others?

A simple web search of FAQs for plant-based diets has hundreds of results, so why another list? Because much of what exists is full of inflated claims, biased opinions, and research that is applied selectively or based on animal studies. Instead, we strive for an evidence-based, practical guide that cuts through the hype and tells what you really need to know. The material has been reviewed by experts in medicine, nursing, nutrition, public health, medical education, community wellness, health policy, and health disparities.

*For questions or comments regarding this document, please contact Richard Rosenfeld, MD, MPH, MBA, Chair of the SUNY Downstate Committee on Plant-based Health & Nutrition at [richard.rosenfeld@downstate.edu](mailto:richard.rosenfeld@downstate.edu)*