

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

Plant-Based Diets and Your Health

What are the benefits of plant-based nutrition?

Plant-based nutrition – eating more fruits, vegetables, whole grains, nuts, seeds, and legumes – can prevent, treat, and even reverse certain chronic (persistent or long-lasting) diseases in adults, based on the best research evidence available. The chronic diseases that have been studied most include high blood pressure (hypertension), heart (coronary artery) disease, type 2 diabetes (high blood sugar because your body does not use insulin properly), and high levels of lipids (fat, cholesterol, or triglycerides) in the blood. Studies also often find that adopting a plant-based diet leads to natural, and often sustained, weight loss among people who are overweight, obese, or have a high body mass index.

Can a plant-based diet improve my health?

Yes, but it depends on what kind of foods you eat. A *healthy* plant-based diet, also called a *whole-food plant-based diet*, includes whole-grains (oatmeal, brown rice, quinoa, barley, corn meal, whole wheat bread or pasta) and avoids refined foods (oil, sugar, white flour, and most sweeteners) that no longer have all of their original nutrients. Products made from refined foods are also excluded (cakes, white bread, white flour, candy, cereals, and white pasta and white rice). An *unhealthy* plant-based diet has many refined foods and could be as simple as drinking soda and eating fake meat burgers with French fries for three meals a day (which we certainly do not recommend).

If refined foods are not healthy, does that mean that processed foods are also bad?

Processed foods have simply gone through a “process” in preparation, which can be as simple as changing the texture (grinding, rolling, or chopping) or as complicated as elaborate combinations of refined and artificial ingredients. Processed foods can be good for you if they include whole-grains and unrefined ingredients; examples include dried fruit, frozen vegetables, and whole-grain breads, crackers, and pastas. Processed foods that are bad for you include chips, cookies, crackers, cakes, candies, and “wheat breads” or “multi-grain breads” made from anything less than 100% whole grains.

How does the health of people who eat plant-based diets compare to meat-eaters?

Research studies with more about 500,000 people show that eating more plants makes you *less likely to develop* high blood pressure, heart disease (from clogged arteries), type 2 diabetes, and cancers related to the stomach and intestines. Eating more plant foods also makes you *less likely to die* from heart disease, reduced blood flow to the brain (stroke and cerebrovascular disease), and some cancers (of the pancreas, blood, or lymph organs). Lastly, individuals who eat more plants have lower body weight, lower cholesterol levels (total cholesterol and the “bad” LDL type), lower fasting blood sugar levels, and less inflammation-causing substances in their blood.

Will eating soy products (tofu, tempeh) increase my risk of breast or other cancers?

The short answer is “no,” based on dozens of research studies with hundreds of thousands of participants. When the results of these studies are summarized, a high intake of soy products *does not* increase risk of death from cancer, stroke, or heart disease. Regarding breast cancer specifically, current research suggests that higher soy intake may reduce overall risk. In contrast, higher intake of red meat and processed meat may increase breast cancer risk.

Can switching to a plant-based diet help me if I already have a health problem?

Yes, based on research studies of people with chronic diseases who follow a plant-based diet over long periods of time or who are randomly assigned to a plant-based diet for weeks or months and then compared to other people eating less plants (more animal products). These studies show that plant-based diets can improve blood flow to the heart (and even *reverse* coronary artery disease), improve diabetes (better levels of hemoglobin A1c), reduce body weight, reduce the need for diabetes medication, and reduce the blood levels of substances associated with poor health, including total cholesterol, LDL cholesterol, fasting glucose, and C-reactive protein (a measure of inflammation in your body).

Are plant-based diets safe for children?

Plant-based diets are generally considered safe for children, provided that key nutrients are monitored and supplemented when needed. Very few research studies of plant-based nutrition have focused on children, but those that do suggest that the same health benefits seen in adults (e.g., less obesity, overweight, and cardiovascular risk) would most likely extend to children.



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