

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

Practical Aspects of Plant-Based Nutrition

Will eating a plant-based diet be expensive?

Plant-based diets include some of the least expensive items at the grocery store, such as legumes, potatoes, and whole-grain (brown) rice that are versatile and easy replacements for meat. A good way to save money is to use less expensive seasonal produce when available and to rely more in winter months on beans, whole grains, winter produce (e.g., squash and leafy greens), and frozen vegetables. Many grocery stores or co-ops have bulk bins that offer these and other plant-based staples at a discount. Frozen fruits and vegetables are much cheaper than fresh produce and still retain high amounts of their nutrients. A whole food, plant-based diet centered on starchy foods (whole grains, potatoes, and legumes) will cost much less than one involving meat products, but a plant-based diet that relies on exotic, highly processed, or refined foods could be costly.

How can I follow a plant-based diet when I go out to eat?

Many restaurants provide vegetarian or vegan options on their menu and will work with your dietary needs. Talk with your server or the chef to see if they can leave out dairy or meat on meals they already have on their menu. You may also check the side dishes on the menu and foods that accompany main dishes and ask your waiter if the chef can make a main dish for you by combining these items. For example, many items like baked potatoes, side salads, beans, and other sides appear on the menu as meat counterparts but make an excellent main dish on their own when combined.

Is there a way to find restaurants that offer plant-based food choices?

There are many online resources that rate and highlight plant-based restaurants around the world, but an easy way to locate them is using the free HappyCow app on your smartphone or computer. The app will locate plant-based restaurants worldwide, allowing you to specify vegan restaurants only, vegetarian restaurants, or restaurants with vegetarian options. Since these apps do not indicate how healthy the food actually is, consumers should review restaurant menus and descriptions to ensure the food is wholesome and unrefined.

If I eat a plant-based diet should I be concerned about added sugars?

Yes. Natural sugars are present in foods like milk and fruits, but sugars are often added to drinks (soft, fruit, and sports), candy, cookies, cereals, baked goods, deserts, ice cream, flavored yogurt, condiments, and salad dressings. Added sugars contribute to diabetes, inflammation, weight gain, heart disease, high blood pressure, and fat build-up in the liver that can eventually cause damage. You can look at the FDA nutritional label of foods to find out how much total sugar is added, beyond what occurs naturally (which is fine to eat). In addition to all ingredients called “sugar” (brown, powdered, raw, granulated) added sugars include agave nectar, corn syrup, corn sweetener, dextrose, fructose, honey, syrups (malt, maple), molasses, and sucrose.

What sugar substitutes are best when I want something sweet?

We all crave something sweet from time to time. If that sweetness comes from a sugar substitute the possibilities are high-intensity sweeteners (i.e., saccharin, aspartame, sucralose), generally recognized as safe (GRAS) sweeteners (i.e., stevia, monk fruit extract), and sugar alcohols (ie.g., xylitol, sorbitol, erythritol). These substitutes, however, have no nutritional value, do not satisfy hunger like real sugar, can be much sweeter than sugar, and may lead to overeating. When you want something sweet reach for fresh or dried fruit, not sugar substitutes. For cooking or baking, date sugar, date nectar, and pureed dried fruits are healthier than most alternatives.

Which meat substitutes and alternatives are best if I want to avoid eating meat?

Several foods provide the texture and protein that some people crave in meat even though they are entirely plant-based. Some of the most popular include:

- ✓ Tofu, made from coagulated fresh soy milk, can soak up flavors in recipes and is a good protein source (3.5 ounces has about 80 calories, 8 grams protein, 4 grams fat, no fiber)
- ✓ Tempeh, made from fermented soy beans, has a hearty texture with lots of protein and fiber (3.5 ounces has about 150 calories, 16 grams protein, 4 grams fat, 12 grams fiber)
- ✓ Seitan, a textured wheat protein often found in fake meats, is less healthy than tofu or tempeh because it is highly processed and full of added salt (3.5 ounces has about 125 calories, 25 grams protein, 350 mg sodium, and minimal fat or fiber)
- ✓ Jackfruit, a tropical tree fruit that is a versatile meat substitute, is high in fiber (3.5 ounces has about 50 calories, 2 grams protein, 6 grams fiber, no fat)

Are mock meats and fake meats healthy if they are plant-based?

You will have to read the ingredients and the nutrition facts label to know for sure, but generally these convenient off-the-shelf (or out-of-the-freezer) meat alternatives are highly processed, full of salt, high in added oils, and are often made with seitan (textured wheat protein) or genetically modified soy protein concentrate or isolate (stripped of other nutrients and often containing unhealthy additives). Some fake meats have healthier main ingredients (lentils, jackfruit, eggplant, tofu, tempeh, or quinoa), but you would be much better off using these ingredients on their own, free of all the added fat, salt, and sugar.

Can I stay healthy if I don't drink milk or eat dairy products?

A varied whole-food, plant-based diet will provide all the protein, calcium, and vitamin D your body needs, without having to consume dairy products (milk, cheese, yogurt, butter, ice cream). In fact, consuming dairy can be harmful. Men who drink whole milk increase their risk of death from prostate cancer by about 50%, most likely because milk contains sex hormones (estrogen) and insulin-like growth factor that can promote cancer growth. Other cancers, however, have not been linked to dairy product consumption. Although dairy products add cholesterol and saturated fat to your diet, consuming dairy products is not associated with a higher risk of stroke or heart disease. One large recent study suggest that dairy intake may actually reduce death from stroke or heart disease (in adults with no prior history of these conditions), but this finding has not been replicated by other researchers in different settings.

What is the best way to cook food without added oil?

Extracted oils (including olive oils) are refined, empty-calorie foods that lack nutrients, so you should ideally avoid them when cooking. You can sauté without oil by using a high-quality, non-stick pan with a tablespoon or two of liquid (water, broth, or wine) and adding more liquid, as needed, to prevent sticking. Baking and roasting are great for many vegetables and foods, which should be placed on parchment paper (to avoid sticking) and can be sprayed with water or broth then seasoned with your favorite herbs and spices. Some final options include steaming or using an air fryer (to get crispy food without deep frying).



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