

# Health Benefits of Plant-Based Diet

As the name implies, a plant-based diet is one comprising of ONLY or mostly plant foods. A Plant-based pattern of eating has several benefits for a person's health.

In this article, we will see an overview of the plant-based diet, its health benefits, and what you should consider concerning its nutritional profile before switching to it.



[Photo Credit](#)

## Overview of a plant-based diet

A plant-based diet is a pattern of eating that involves eating mostly plant-based foods. The term plant-based diet is understood and used in different ways.

To some people, a plant-based diet is the same as a vegan diet, which is a diet that is completely free of animal products.

For other people, a plant-based diet focuses mainly on plant-based foods, like whole grains, vegetables, fruits, legumes, and nuts, with the occasional intake of dairy products, fish, or meat.

In a plant-based diet, the dieter focuses on nutritious whole foods, and not processed foods.

## **What are the health benefits of a plant-based diet?**

A plant-based diet offers a wide range of health benefits. These include:

### **1. Improved weight management**

A 2013 study [1] published in *The Permanente Journal* suggests that plant-based dieters tend to have a lower body mass index compared to other people. The study also suggests that people who eat mainly plant-based foods have lower rates of chronic diseases like heart disease, diabetes, and obesity compared to those who eat meat.

Plant-based foods are rich in complex carbohydrates, fiber, and water content (from vegetables and fruits). This keeps you feeling fuller for a longer time. What's more, you also use more energy when resting.

Another study conducted in 2018 [2] found that a plant-based diet helped in the treatment of obesity. The researchers in this study assigned 75 obese or overweight people to a vegan diet, as well as to their regular meaty diet. Within 4 months, those assigned to the vegan diet group lost over 14.33 pounds (6.5kg). The vegan group also lost a lot of fat and experienced improved insulin sensitivity. On the other hand, those who stuck to their regular meaty diet saw no improvements.

Another study [3] published in *Diabetes Care* involving over 60,000 people found that people who adhered strictly to a plant-based diet had the lowest average BMI. This was followed only by pescatarians (people who eat fish but no other meat), and lacto-ovo vegetarians (people who eat eggs and dairy). Those whose BMI was higher than average were non-vegetarians.

### **2. Lower risk of heart disease**

Eating fresh vegetables and fruits, fiber, and legumes is associated with a lower risk of heart disease [4, 5, 6].

A well-planned plant-based diet will contain these foods in large amounts.

According to one observational study published in the journal *Nutrients* [7], people who eat mainly plant-based foods have their risk of developing high blood pressure reduced by 75% compared to meat-eaters. Another study specifically observed that vegans have a 42% lower risk of dying from heart disease [8].

It is also worth mentioning that plant-based diets are very effective at reducing LDL cholesterol, blood sugar, and total cholesterol compared to other diets [9, 10].

Of course, the heart benefits immensely from this, because reducing cholesterol, blood sugar levels, and high blood pressure may translate to a 46% reduction in the risk of heart disease [11].

### **3. A plant-based diet helps in the prevention and treatment of diabetes**

Studies have shown that plant-based diets help in the prevention and management of diabetes by improving sensitivity and reducing resistance to insulin.

In the 2009 study published in *Diabetes Care* [3], only 2.9% of the participants on a vegan diet had type 2 diabetes, compared to the over 7.6% of non-vegetarian dieters.

Researchers have also studied the effect of a plant-based diet on diabetes treatment. A 2018 review [12] suggests that vegan and vegetarian diets can help diabetic individuals to lose weight, reduce their medication needs, and improve other metabolic markers.

### **4. A plant-based diet may offer protection against certain cancers**

The World Health Organization has reported that over a third of all cancers can be prevented by your diet and other factors that are entirely within your control.

For example, regular intake of legumes may cause a 9 – 18% reduction in your risk of colorectal cancer [13].

Other studies have found that a daily intake of at least 7 portions of fresh vegetables and fruits may lower your risk of cancer-related death by at least 15% [14].

Vegans eat plenty of vegetables, fruits, and legumes, compared to non-vegans. This explains why a review of studies suggested that vegans may have a 15% lower risk of having cancer or dying from it.

It is also worth mentioning that vegan diets are enriched with soy products, and soy products protect against breast cancer [15].

Avoiding some animal products may also reduce the risk of colon, breast, and prostate cancers. This is attributed to the fact that vegan diets are devoid of processed meats, smoked meats, or meats cooked at very high temperatures, which are believed to cause certain types of cancers [16, 17].

## **5. A plant-based diet reduces pain from arthritis**

Studies have shown that a plant-based diet has positive effects on arthritis.

A randomized controlled trial involving 40 arthritis patients reported that patients randomly assigned to a 6-week course of plant-based vegan diet experienced higher energy levels and better overall health compared to those who did not eat the plant-based diet [18].

Other studies suggest that a plant-based diet can improve symptoms of rheumatoid arthritis, such as joint swelling, morning stiffness, and pain.

These positive effects may be due to the high antioxidant, fiber, and probiotic content of plant-based foods.

## **Takeaway**

A plant-based diet has many health benefits. These include lowering the risk of diabetes, heart disease, and arthritis, as well as helping with weight loss.

If you're switching to a plant-based diet, begin by gradually lowering your dairy and meat intake.

You can also start by eating a plant-based meal once a week or swapping out an animal product for a plant-based product.

It is also important to consult your dietitian or doctor before making drastic changes to your diet.

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