



Unlock the Potential of Food

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What Are the Benefits of Eating More Plant-Based Foods?

You've probably been hearing a lot about eating a more plant-based diet. In fact, the latest version of Canada's Food Guide recommends choosing protein foods that come from plants more often. This doesn't mean you need to become exclusively vegetarian or vegan, it means that including more plant-based meals and snacks into your diet will benefit your health. Read on to learn more about the benefits of eating more plant-based and to find easy meal and snack ideas.

What are the benefits of eating more plant-based?

Eating plant-based can lower your risk of diseases like heart disease, colon cancer and type 2 diabetes.

Plant-based eating means incorporating more vegetables, fruits, whole grains and plant-based proteins into your diet. Canada's Food Guide recommends choosing foods that come from plants more often because of the health benefits that this type of eating pattern can have. Research shows that in general, people who eat more plant-based foods have lower risk of heart disease, colon cancer and type 2 diabetes. This is because eating plant-based usually leads to diets that are:

- Higher in fibre
- Higher in fruits and vegetables
- Higher in nuts and soy protein (these foods may help reduce cholesterol)
- Lower in processed meat
- Lower in saturated fat

Remember, healthy eating looks different for everyone, speak to a dietitian about food choices that meet your nutritional needs, culture, medical history and personal preferences.

Using plant-based proteins can help you save money on your grocery bill.

Plant-based proteins like legumes and tofu are often less expensive than animal-based proteins.

Choosing plant-based proteins more often is good for the environment.

Another bonus of eating plant-based is that diets higher in plant-based foods may also have a lower environmental impact. Growing and producing plant-based foods usually uses less land, energy and water.

What are examples of plant-based proteins?

There are many plant-based proteins to choose from, like:

- Brown, green or red or other lentils
- Peas such as chickpeas and split peas
- Dried beans such as black beans and kidney beans
- Soy products like tofu, tempeh and edamame
- Fortified soy beverage
- Nuts and seeds and nut and seed butters (like peanut butter)

There are also many meat substitutes on the market, like veggie burgers. These can be an easy and convenient substitute for meat, but they can also be high in salt and fat, so make sure to compare labels and use them in moderation.

Will I get enough protein if I eat plant-based?

You may be surprised at how quickly protein can add up during the day! You don't need to eat large amounts of protein food to meet your nutritional needs. For example, even a slice of whole grain bread contains 4 grams of protein.

If you eat a balanced diet following Canada's Food Guide you will get enough protein. This means choosing a protein food at each meal. If you want to eat more plant-based, don't just cut out the animal proteins, make sure to swap it with a plant-based alternative. For example, if you usually eat pasta Bolognese, you could try using lentils instead of ground beef. If you like to eat eggs and toast in the morning, try a tofu scramble instead.

By including protein foods at every meal and making sure to eat a variety of foods, you should have no trouble getting protein, even if you're eating plant-based. Learn more about how much protein you need at UnlockFood.ca.

Some people may need more protein, speak to your dietitian for personalized advice.

Will I get enough iron and calcium if I eat more plant-based?

Iron

Iron is found in a variety of plant foods like nuts, seeds, lentils and tofu. It is also found in iron fortified products (like breads, pastas and cereals). There are two types of iron – heme and non-heme. Heme iron is found in animal foods. Non-heme iron is found in plant foods. Although heme iron is better absorbed in the body than non-heme iron, there are ways to increase absorption of non-heme iron. Eat foods that contain non-heme iron together with foods that contain vitamin C.

Speak to a dietitian if you are concerned about your iron intake. If you are tired and irritable and think you may be low in iron, speak to your health care provider.

Calcium

Calcium is found in many plant-based foods like tofu, beans, almonds and leafy greens like spinach and kale. Fortified soy-beverage is an especially good source of calcium. If you eat a balanced diet including a variety of calcium-containing foods throughout the day, you should be able to meet your calcium needs.

How can I incorporate more plant-based proteins into my diet?

If you are just beginning to eat more plant-based, start with a few plant-based meals a week and work up. Plant-based proteins often have a neutral flavour, making them easy to incorporate in many dishes. As you gain experience working with plant-based proteins, you can experiment with different combinations and flavours. Here are some ideas to get you started:

- Start your day with a whole-grain cereal or a bowl of oatmeal. Increase the flavour with some almonds or pumpkin seeds. (*1/4 cup oatmeal = 3 grams protein; 1/4 cup almonds = 8 grams protein*)
- Add chickpeas, lentils or black beans to your soup or salad at lunch. (*3/4 cup black beans = 11 grams protein; 3/4 cup lentils = 13 grams protein*)
- Make a hearty bowl of lentil soup for dinner.
- Cook up a big bowl of bean rich chili that's loaded with vegetables. (*1 serving = 14 grams protein*)
- Need an afternoon pick-me-up? Try peanut butter on whole grain bread with a glass of fortified soy beverage. (*2 tablespoon peanut butter = 7 grams protein*)
- Try this tofu stir-fry loaded with vegetables and flavoured with sweet chilli sauce. (*3/4 cup tofu = 16 grams protein*)
- Try a quinoa salad instead of pasta. Quinoa is a whole grain that is also a source of protein. (*1/2 cup quinoa = 3 grams protein*)
- Use fortified soy beverage in smoothies instead of milk. Try this refreshing berry and spinach smoothie. (*1 cup of soy beverage = 7 grams protein*)

How can a dietitian help?

A dietitian can suggest ways to incorporate more plant-based foods and proteins into your diet. They can work with you to make sure you are getting enough protein to meet your unique needs and goals. Dietitians consider your lifestyle, culture, health conditions, food skills, budget and preferences to give you a personalized plan. Most employee benefit plans cover dietitian services. Connect with a dietitian today!

Visit www.NutritionMonth2023.ca for more on how to connect with a dietitian and for trusted food and nutrition information.