Prevention C+lumn

Should we really be eating less meat?

Eating less meat is good for you. For years now, studies have been conclusive and the messages from public health officials have been crystal clear. Adopting a vegetarian diet is a good strategy to improve your health and that of the planet's, too. But do you have to cut all animal-based products from your diet to achieve that goal?

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Vegetarian diets and health

From a health standpoint, adopting a vegetarian diet will invariably increase the quantity and variety of plant-based protein and vegetables that you would consume. This principle is in line with the most recent recommendations in *Canada's Food Guide*.

As a matter of fact, eating less meat means you can make room for more plants! Think legumes, tofu, nuts and grains. All excellent sources of fibre that improve digestion. You also become satiated quicker and for a longer period of time. Plus, they **lower cholesterol and blood sugar levels**, and **reduce the risk of developing certain chronic diseases**, such as cardiovascular disease and type 2 diabetes.

What's more, a diet made up mostly of plants **reduces our intake of saturated fats** and increases our consumption of unsaturated fats. That's the ratio you should be targeting for a healthy heart.

This doesn't mean you need to eliminate all animal proteins from your diet. As demonstrated with the Mediterranean diet, which has been studied time and again by researchers and recommended to optimize your cardiovascular health, there's still room for poultry, fish and seafood in your diet – even red meat; however, it is recommended that you consume them only a few times a week, i.e. the majority of proteins in your dishes should come from dairy products, eggs, legumes, nuts and grains. ▪

WHAT IS VEGETARIANISM, EXACTLY?

Vegetarianism is the practice of abstaining from eating meat, poultry fish and seafood. Strict vegetarianism, also known as **veganism** , excludes all animal-based foods, including eggs and dairy products. There are many reasons for adopting this type of diet, including animal welfare, reducing the environmental footprint or improving your health. ▪

How to eat less meat

When cooking, vegetarian recipes encourage us to **try dishes from around the world** to replace meat and consequently, to discover how versatile legumes, tofu, nuts and grains in all their forms can be. You can make soups or stews or throw them in sautés and sauces. Suggestion: **Indian, Mexican and Moroccan cuisine** are excellent sources of inspiration.

The idea is to not limit yourself or make sudden, drastic changes to your diet! If you don't mind trying something new, it becomes a lot more fun and tasty, too. ▪

Are "veggie" products really good for you?

Whether it's for our health or the environment, it's important to consider the **extent of food processing**, regardless if the products are plant- or animal-based.

Obviously, not all vegetarian products are better for your health. Highly processed foods, like mock meats or cheeses, are usually made with a long list of ingredients that include many additives. They also contain more sugar and salt than basic foods such as meat, poultry and fish. To eat healthy, it's **always better to eat less processed foods**. For example, it's better to eat plant-based, home-made hamburger patties made up of legumes and nuts rather than the highly processed vegan, store-bought variety.

In all cases, **cooking yourself** allows you to significantly reduce your intake of highly processed foods. Plus, you'll discover new ingredients and flavours while you're at it! ∎

What about the planet?

3 EASY TIPS for going more "veggie"

1. **Replace half your ground meat** with the same amount of lentils or other legumes.

2. **Add silken tofu** to your smoothies, rather than yogurt.

3. **Combine a whole grain** (bulgur, quinoa…) **and/or a legume** (chic peas, beans, etc.) to your vegetables for a satisfying salad as a meal**.**

Extra benefit: Reducing your meat consumption can also save you quite a bit of cash. By replacing the meat from one meal a day with vegetable protein, you save approximately $50 a week. At the end of the year, that adds up to at least $2,600 in savings! ∎

As a general rule, producing plant-based proteins causes lower levels of harmful greenhouse gas emissions than animal-based proteins. In fact, according to the most recent data from the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations, 14.5% of greenhouse gas emissions are caused by the livestock sector, which is responsible for the meat that ends up on our plates. This represents the exact same percentage as the transport industry's carbon footprint. That's why eating a plant-based diet or reducing our consumption of meat or other animal-based proteins appears to be an effective strategy for reducing the impact of our diet on climate change.

Being informed on where the animals come from and how they are raised is another good way of being more environmentally responsible through your diet. You can choose meats from environmentally friendly sources by looking for organic brands. It is also recommended that you purchase fish that originate from **sustainable fisheries**, particularly fish identified with the *Ocean Wise* logo, and to vary the type of fish you eat. ∎

In conclusion

A diet mostly made up of vegetables is more beneficial for our health and the planet's, too. But you don't necessarily have to eliminate all animal-based products to reap the benefits. You can gradually reduce your animal-based protein intake and successfully start changing your eating habits for the benefit of all! ∎