



Vegetarian Nutrition

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RD Resources for Consumers:

Therapeutic Use of Vegetarian/Vegan Diets in Chronic Disease

Well-balanced vegetarian diets reduce risk of many chronic diseases, and may treat, improve or reverse obesity, heart disease, high blood pressure, type 2 diabetes, and some digestive problems. They also offer promise in treatment for cancer and kidney disease.

Overweight / Obesity

The high fiber and nutrient density (more nutrients for fewer calories) of vegetarian diets might be one reason why these eating styles may support healthy weight loss. The fiber in beans, whole grains, fruits and vegetables can provide extended fullness after meals and re-balance gut bacteria to support efficient metabolism. Since obesity is a risk factor for most of the chronic diseases discussed below, healthy weight loss can aid in their treatment.



Heart Disease

Vegetarian diets help treat heart disease by addressing obesity, and the low saturated fat content of plant foods helps reduce cholesterol production. Good sources of soluble fiber, such as beans, barley, oats, and certain fruit, including apples, peaches, pears and plums, help reduce blood cholesterol levels. Plants contain thousands of other plant chemicals and healthy oils that can literally treat disease thus reducing risk of heart attack and stroke.



Type 2 Diabetes

Vegetarian/vegan diets help treat diabetes, mostly through weight loss. The high fiber content found in a vegetarian diet helps control blood sugar swings after meals and the resulting fullness helps control intake and hunger cravings, increasing satiety and fullness and stabilizing blood sugar levels. Eating more whole grains may also supply greater amounts of nutrients needed to help your body use blood sugar more efficiently.



Hypertension (High Blood Pressure)

In addition to supporting weight loss, meals based around mostly home-prepared, unprocessed plant foods may support healthy blood pressure, since they are naturally low in sodium. Starting from such a healthy base may then allow moderate use of added salt or salty ingredients. Overall, be cautious about sodium intake from foods like bread, breakfast cereals, cheese, bottled sauces, marinades and dressings, soups, processed foods and restaurant meals. Additionally, most fruits, vegetables and especially beans are high in potassium which also may be essential to restoring healthy blood pressure.



Constipation and Diverticular Disease

High fiber foods reduce constipation and contribute to regular, smooth bowel movements. Soluble fiber from foods such as beans, oats, barley and apples attracts water to the colon, making stools soft and easy to pass, and supports healthy gut bacteria. Movement of stool is further aided by insoluble fiber found in the more sturdy parts of plant foods, such as fruit peels and many vegetables. Improved bowel function also reduces risk of diverticulosis which is the presence of small pouches pushed out from the colon wall due to heavy straining during bowel movements.



Chronic Kidney Failure

Diabetes and hypertension significantly increase risk for chronic kidney disease. When vegetarian diets reduce blood sugar and blood pressure, kidney disease prognosis improves, more so in early stages of kidney disease. The lower protein and sodium content typical of vegetarian diets limits further damage and may slow disease progression.



Cancer

Nutrition guidelines for cancer recovery are similar to those for prevention and recovery include choosing whole grains, beans, fruits and vegetables, and significantly limiting red and processed meats. While research is ongoing, no data on the effects of vegetarian diets on cancer remission or death rates are available. Despite exaggerated concerns about the use of soy foods during breast cancer recovery, research now shows either a neutral effect or small benefits, and perhaps more.



Easing Digestive Issues

Because of digestive concerns, many people avoid eating beans, which are healthy and delicious sources of protein, fiber and other nutrients. Check out these easy methods to reduce the gas and bloating that beans can sometimes produce:

- In canned beans, the cause of the gas and bloating is in the liquid. Rinse canned beans well to help reduce flatulence. Baked beans may produce more gas in some people because the gas-causing agent is consumed with the sauce.
- For dried beans, soak for 8-10 hours and rinse before cooking. Repeatedly rinsing and adding fresh water over that time may provide even better results.
- Increase intake slowly. Start with more digestible types, such as lentils and split peas, in small amounts. Slowly increase the portion size and frequency, and then add larger beans, such as black, pinto, red, kidney, or chickpeas.
- Instead of eating whole beans, mash or puree for use in burritos, soups, and dips.

Summary

Well-designed vegetarian diets can help to reverse major chronic diseases, or at least limit the damage from these diseases. The potential benefits of following a well-balanced vegetarian diet to treat chronic disease are almost unlimited. A registered dietitian nutritionist (RDN) can help you develop a healthy vegetarian or vegan dietary plan that meets your needs.

A registered dietitian nutritionist can help you develop a healthy vegetarian eating plan that meets your needs. To find an RDN in your area, visit <https://vegetariannutrition.net/find-a-registered-dietitian/>