

IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Defining a plant-based diet
- » Getting familiar with the core of a plant-based diet
- » Answering common questions about a plant-based diet
- » Using simple ideas to start your plant-based diet today

Chapter **1**

What Is a Plant-Based Diet?

The goal of a plant-based diet is to eat more plants. Sounds simple enough — or maybe it doesn't. Eating nothing but plant-based foods is intimidating for a lot of people. Most people are comfortable with their current way of eating and are unsure about what to do with plants: Which ones should you eat and when? Can you get full on plants alone? All kinds of questions and concerns come up, and we address some of the common ones in this chapter.

In this chapter, we also give you an overview of life on a plant-based diet and outline what you will and won't eat. We explain how eating this way can benefit so many aspects of your life — mainly your health. At the end of the day, it's all about feeling better, looking better, and just being better, and this way of eating can help you do just that.

What Does Plant-Based Mean?

Eating a plant-based diet simply means the majority of your diet is made up of plants. No matter where you are or what you eat right now, you can eat more plants (everyone can). Of course, our goal and the goal of this book is to get you to

eat predominantly (and, ideally, exclusively) plant-based all the time, but you'll likely have a transitional phase, and it starts with eating more of the stuff that the earth has so deliciously and naturally provided.

We get to the “meat” of eating plant-based later in this chapter and explain what this really looks like on your plate on a day-to-day basis, but first we want to compare this approach to some other popular veggie-minded trends.

There are other diets that are similar to the plant-based diet, which focus on different food choices. That doesn't mean you have to label yourself and stick with only one way of eating; these diets include different ways of eating and help you understand what kinds of food choices fall within a certain category. The following breakdown can help you understand how a plant-based diet fits into the bigger picture:

- » **Plant-based:** A way of eating based on fruits, vegetables, grains, legumes, nuts, and seeds with few or no animal products. Ideally, a plant-based diet is a vegan diet with a bit of flexibility in the transitional phases, with the goal of becoming 100 percent plant-based over time.
- » **Vegan:** A way of eating that doesn't include anything that comes from an animal, be it fish, fowl, mammal, or insect. Vegans refrain from consuming not only animal meats but also any foods made by animals (such as dairy milk and honey). They also abstain from purchasing, wearing, or using animal products of any kind (for example, leather). Veganism is a lifestyle, not just a diet. The vegan way of eating includes the following subsets:
 - **Fruitarian:** A vegan diet that consists mainly of fruit.
 - **Raw vegan:** A vegan diet that is uncooked and often includes dehydrated foods.
- » **Vegetarian:** A plant-based diet that may include animal products like dairy and eggs but doesn't include animal meat. The vegetarian diet includes the following subsets:
 - **Lacto-vegetarian:** A vegetarian diet that includes dairy products (for example, milk, cheese, butter, and yogurt) but not eggs.
 - **Ovo-vegetarian:** A vegetarian diet that includes eggs but not dairy.
 - **Lacto-ovo vegetarian:** A vegetarian diet that includes dairy and eggs.
 - **Pescatarian:** A vegetarian diet that includes dairy, eggs, and fish.
- » **Flexitarian:** A plant-based diet that includes the occasional consumption of meat or fish.

PLANT-BASED VERSUS WHOLE-FOODS PLANT-BASED

A plant-based diet tends to rely on minimally processed whole foods, but you can find plenty of prepackaged, processed vegan items that aren't necessarily healthy but are technically made from plants and are, therefore, considered plant-based. Items like vegan burgers, vegan sausages, vegan cheese slices or shreds, vegan mayonnaise, vegan butter, and vegan ice cream can mimic the tastes and textures you're familiar with. We don't recommend relying on these foods for the majority of your meals, but they can make the transition to a plant-based diet easier and more convenient. In Part 3, we include a handful of recipes using these plant-based meat and dairy alternatives for those times when you're craving those familiar flavors.

If you choose to follow a whole-foods plant-based diet, on the other hand, you won't be indulging in *any* of those store-bought packaged items. Most people following a whole-foods plant-based diet don't consume oils, refined flours (like all-purpose flour), or refined sugars (like white sugar). A whole-foods plant-based diet is one of the healthiest ways of eating, and we recommend sticking to it the majority of the time. But we don't want you to stress about enjoying a store-bought vegan burger or indulging in a scoop of creamy vegan ice cream on occasion. Just don't make a habit of it.

Getting to the Root of a Plant-Based Diet

A core group of foods makes up a plant-based diet. When you really understand these foods, you have a strong foundation that you can continuously build upon. You'll find so many wonderful foods to explore and try, but in this section, we introduce you to the basics and tell you what foods to avoid.

What's included

The big question is, "If I'm not eating anything from an animal, what is there to eat?" We begin this section by exploring the wonderful plants that we hope you get to know quite well on this journey. You'll find all sorts of diverse foods to enjoy. If you're new to this way of eating, prepare to be pleasantly surprised by what you find!

Valuable vegetables

You'll discover a whole array of veggies that you'll likely get to know quite well while eating plant-based. If you're new to this diet, you'll probably stick to

tried-and-true, familiar veggies in the beginning because they'll feel safe — and that's okay! But over time, we encourage you to expand into new areas and pick up that funny-looking squash or try that wild, leafy bunch of something. You'll find a vibrant world of valuable vegetables, but for now, here's our starter kit:

- » Beets
- » Carrots
- » Herbs, including basil and parsley
- » Kale
- » Peppers
- » Spinach
- » Squash
- » Sweet potatoes

Fantastic fruits

Ahhh, the sweet juiciness of fresh fruit. We all love it! If you don't, you need to get on this train, because fruits are delicious; sweet; full of fiber, color, and wonderful vitamins; and so, so good for you. Throughout this book, we encourage you to try new ones, but here are some of our top picks to start with:

- » Apples
- » Avocados
- » Bananas
- » Blueberries
- » Coconuts
- » Mangos
- » Pears
- » Pineapples
- » Raspberries
- » Strawberries

Wonderful whole grains

Consuming good-quality whole grains is a healthy part of a plant-based diet. Don't worry — you can still have your breads and pastas, but *whole* is the key word here. You don't want refined or processed — you want the real thing. When you buy these items, make sure the grain itself is the only ingredient. Although it's possible to buy proper whole grains off the shelf in packaging, double-check the label to confirm that it is, indeed, a whole grain (and only a whole grain). Here are some of our favorites (more in Chapter 3):

- » Brown rice
- » Quinoa (technically a seed, but classified as a grain)
- » Rolled oats
- » Sprouted-grain spelt bread

Lovable legumes

Learning to love beans on a plant-based diet is key, because they're a great source of sustenance, protein, and fuel. It may take you and your body a little while to get used to them, but soon enough, they'll be your friends — especially when you discover how great it is to eat them in soups, salads, burgers, and more. Here are some of the best to start with:

- » Black beans
- » Chickpeas
- » Edamame
- » Kidney beans
- » Lentils
- » Split peas
- » Tempeh
- » Tofu

Notable nuts and seeds

Most people love a good handful of nuts! But the thing about eating them on a plant-based diet is making sure that they're unsalted, unoiled, and raw. As long

as you enjoy them in their natural state, feel free to eat them in moderation alongside your other wonderful plant-based foods. Here are the best ones to start with:

- » Almonds
- » Cashews
- » Chia seeds
- » Flaxseeds
- » Hempseeds
- » Pumpkin seeds
- » Sunflower seeds
- » Walnuts



TIP

Try munching on a few nuts or seeds straight up or adding them to salads or other recipes. And if you can't decide which one you have a taste for, toss them all in a trail mix!

The extras

This group of foods isn't really a category per se, but these foods are still part of a plant-based diet. This group includes such things as exotic superfoods, sea vegetables (see Chapter 4), condiments, and natural sweeteners. The following are some specific examples:

- » **Cacao:** The pure form of chocolate.
- » **Honey:** The raw stuff, not the kind in bear-shaped plastic bottles. If you're a vegan, you'll have to skip the honey.
- » **Maple syrup:** Again, the real stuff — no pancake syrup here!
- » **Nori:** A delicious and nutritious sea vegetable.
- » **Nutritional yeast:** A deactivated yeast that has a savory, mildly nutty flavor. It's an excellent source of vitamins, minerals, and high-quality plant protein.
- » **Tamari:** A versatile fermented soy sauce.

What's off limits

As you can imagine, all things that aren't plants are off limits; however, as we mentioned earlier, you may need or want a transitional period during which you wean yourself off these foods one at a time until you can avoid all things from the animal world — including meat, poultry, fish, eggs, milk, and other dairy products.



TIP

Of course, this is the ideal — you have to find your own place on the spectrum of plant-based eating and do what works for you. Often, making something off limits just makes you want it more, so you have to strike a balance between being tough on yourself and being practical.

Common Questions and Answers about a Plant-Based Diet

As with anything new, considering a plant-based diet can bring up all sorts of questions and concerns. This book most likely addresses pretty much everything that has you worried. But to nip the fretting in the bud, here are five of the most common questions about a plant-based diet.

Can I get full eating only plants?

Absolutely! The wonderful thing about eating plants is that you're eating lots of fiber, and fiber makes you full! Also, the more wholesome the plants are (in other words, not processed), the more nutrients you're eating, which helps make you feel more satisfied. As the nutrients load your cells with vitamins and minerals, this helps make you feel pleasantly full, but not stuffed.

Also, the diversity of texture can help make you feel full. Because so many plant foods require you to chew more, you actually spend more time getting through the meal. So, a big bowl of salad with lots of stuff in it may not seem that heavy, but it can fill you up quite fast. We promise, after trying just a few recipes in this book, you'll be quite full!



WARNING

In the beginning, fiber will not be your friend. When you first introduce all the roughage, skins, seeds, and other textures of plants, your gut may have a not-so-fun time getting used to it all. Stick it out. You may feel gassy, bloated, or just “full” all the time, but your gut needs to get used to your increased fiber intake and figure out how to pass these new foods along. When it starts working properly, you'll find that you depend on natural fiber from whole foods, not store-bought powders, to keep you going every day.



TIP

Because fiber draws water out of your body, drink lots of water when you eat fibrous foods to help it move through your body.

How will I get protein?

This is always the big question. Well, we have a big answer: from so many different places! A plant-based diet has so much protein, you may not even believe it. Although it may not seem like the grams of protein add up to the amount of protein you find in meat, what you soon realize is that it's not about the quantity but the quality. The standard American diet often provides too much protein, which can contribute to many chronic illnesses. Plant-based protein sources like legumes, nuts, seeds, quinoa, tempeh, avocado, and green leafy veggies all have their own breakdown of amino acids, which build up inside your body to make a complete protein. The best part is, they absorb into your body much better than animal-based protein. You won't feel that same heaviness eating plant-based protein.

What about calcium?

What about calcium, you ask? Well, did you know that plant-based foods like sesame seeds, hempseeds, bok choy, carob, and figs are extremely rich in calcium? Almost more so than a glass of dairy milk. We know this may be hard to wrap your head around, but it's actually proven in most cultures that the less dairy is consumed, the more calcium is absorbed by the body.



WARNING

Oxalates in some foods can bind to minerals like calcium in the gut and decrease their absorption. This can also lead to a possible increased risk of kidney stones. If you have a history of kidney stones, speak with your doctor about whether a low-oxalate diet is necessary. However, most healthy individuals can consume oxalate-rich foods without issue, and, in fact, avoiding them means you could be missing out on many of their health benefits.

So, fret not — just because you have “grown-ups” thinking you need a glass of milk to get your daily dose of calcium, that doesn't mean the so-called experts are right. Turns out, you can eat almonds, seeds, and greens and get the same amount of calcium in your body. You won't feel bloated, either, because these sources of calcium are loaded with vitamins and minerals, making the nutrients much easier to absorb.

How do I get iron? Won't I become anemic?

Iron is definitely an area of concern for anyone not eating meat, so you need to be a bit more cautious to make sure you're consuming enough plant-based sources of iron, such as the following:

- » Dark leafy greens
- » Dried fruit

- » Legumes
- » Nuts
- » Seaweeds
- » Seeds

If you still feel like you aren't getting enough, you may want to consider taking a good-quality, plant-based iron supplement — even just for a short period of time to boost your stores. It's a good idea to have your iron levels checked regularly by your doctor to make sure they're where they need to be.



REMEMBER

Many people — even athletes — survive and even thrive without meat!

Does eating a plant-based diet help people lose weight?

We're adamant that people should never choose to eat a specific way solely for weight loss. This can lead to calorie restricting, which can deprive your body of essential nutrients and slow down your metabolism.

The good news is that by following a whole-food plant-based, healthy lifestyle, you're more likely to feel great and lose weight naturally. When you focus on eating well-balanced and nutrient-dense meals for fuel, your body isn't deprived, and it starts to function efficiently. Deprivation is not an option.

A Quick Guide to Making a Plant-Based Diet Part of Your Everyday Life



TIP

You can start with simple ways to make the transition to eating plant-based foods. Here are a few suggestions to help you get started today:

- » **Replace one to three meals a week with plant-based ones.** Use some of the recipes in this book (flip to Part 3) or search for others that appeal to your palate.
- » **Include healthy meat alternatives in place of meat in your meals.** Try beans, legumes, nuts, and fermented soy.

- » **Choose healthy alternatives to dairy.** For example, instead of dairy milk, try rice milk, almond milk, or hempseed milk; instead of cheese, try avocados and cashews.
- » **Explore new vegetables.** Go beyond your usual suspects and experiment with new colors and different green leafy vegetables.
- » **Have a smoothie for breakfast.** Swap out bacon and eggs for a nutritious blended fruit smoothie to get you going in the morning.
- » **Pack power snacks.** Don't lurk around the vending machines, which are filled with non-plant-based ingredients. Instead, bring trail mix (nuts, seeds, and dried fruit) to work, or keep a small container of it handy at all times.
- » **Make a simple veggie dinner at least one night a week.** If you're just getting started, change up at least one of your meat-centered meals to something plant-based yet familiar, like a vegetable stir-fry, hearty soup, or pasta.

FIVE CONVENIENT AND VERSATILE STORE-BOUGHT PROTEIN OPTIONS

As we mention earlier, store-bought packaged items should be used sparingly. Consider them a treat, not something to consume every day or even every week. Different brands have slightly different textures and tastes, so experiment to find which ones you like best. Here are some options to try:

- **Vegan ground “meat”:** Use just as you would animal-based ground meat. Try our recipe for Vegan Sloppy Joes (see Chapter 12).
- **Vegan burgers:** These are ready to pan-fry or grill. Top them off with your favorite burger toppings, and you won't know the difference. Try our recipe for Vegan Burgers with Apricot Jalapeño Jam (see Chapter 12).
- **Vegan sausages:** Italian, hot, brats, breakfast . . . there is no shortage of vegan sausages on the market today. Try our Vegan Sausage and Roasted Vegetables Sheet-Pan Meal (see Chapter 12).
- **Vegan cheese slices:** For those times when you just need something cheesy! Try our recipe for Pickled Onion Pesto Grilled Cheese (see Chapter 11).
- **Vegan mayonnaise:** Sometimes you just can't beat the creamy, tangy flavor of mayo. Try our recipe for Coleslaw Pasta Salad (see Chapter 10).