

Plant-based eating guidelines

What is a plant-based diet?

A plant-based eating pattern is made up of mostly plant foods like vegetables, fruits, whole grains, legumes, nuts and seeds. You may still eat animal foods like meat, poultry, seafood, eggs and dairy products, but in smaller amounts.

What are the benefits of eating plant foods?

A diet high in plant foods usually means you eat more fibre and less saturated fat. Plant foods are also rich in antioxidants, natural compounds that help protect your body's cells from damage. This offers many health benefits, such as lowering the risk of heart disease, many cancers and type 2 diabetes.

How you eat can also have an impact on the planet. In general, less resources are used to make plant foods which helps lower carbon emissions and saves energy, water and land.

What should I eat?

Use your plate as a guide to make balanced, plant-based meals and snacks.

Vegetables and fruits

Fill half your plate with vegetables and fruit. Fresh, frozen and canned fruits and vegetables are all healthy options. Choose a variety of colours to get different vitamins, minerals and antioxidants.

Tips to eat more vegetables and fruit:

- Have fresh fruit or cut-up vegetables like carrots and broccoli ready for a quick snack
- Top yogurt, whole grain breakfast cereals or oatmeal with fresh or frozen fruit
- Add fresh or frozen fruit to muffins or loaves

- Use mashed avocado as a dip for whole grain crackers and vegetables
- Add sliced vegetables or avocado to sandwiches
- Add chopped vegetables to stir-fries, chili, scrambled eggs or pasta
- Add frozen or low-sodium canned vegetables to stews, casseroles and soups

Whole grains

Fill a quarter of your plate with whole grain foods, such as brown or wild rice, buckwheat, barley, oats or quinoa.

Whole grain foods include all parts of the grain and are a good source of fibre, vitamins and minerals. Check the ingredient list to make sure foods are whole grain. One of the first ingredients should start with “whole grain”, followed by the name of the grain. For example, whole grain durum, whole grain rye or whole grain flour.

Tips to eat more whole grains:

- Start the day with a bowl of oatmeal, whole grain cereal or whole grain toast
- Use brown rice, barley or whole grain pasta instead of white rice or noodles in soups
- Add quinoa or farro to salads

Protein foods

Fill a quarter of your plate with protein foods. Aim to include plant-based protein foods every day for a healthy and often budget-friendly option. Examples include legumes, tofu, nuts and seeds.

You do not have to combine different plant foods in a meal to get a “complete” protein. Your body will do this for you if you eat a variety of plant-based protein foods each day.

You also do not need to worry about getting enough protein on a plant-based diet. The amount of protein adds up throughout the day, making it easy for most people to meet their needs.

Tips to eat more plant-based protein foods:

- Replace half the meat in a chili or pasta sauce with beans, chickpeas or lentils
- Add tofu or tempeh in a soba noodle stir-fry
- Make a banana peanut butter smoothie with fortified soy beverage or soy yogurt
- Sprinkle nuts and seeds on cereals or salads
- Have hummus with cut-up vegetables or use it as a sandwich spread
- Keep low-sodium canned beans and lentils ready for a quick addition to soups and stews

What should I drink?

Make water your drink of choice. Other healthy options include unsweetened coffee and tea, plain lower fat milk, and fortified plant-based beverages such as soy, oat and almond.

Are all plant foods nutritious?

No. Some plant foods are processed or prepared in a way that makes them high in sodium, added sugars or saturated fat. For example:

- Instant potatoes, baked or refried beans, and meat substitutes are often high in sodium and saturated fat
- Flavoured hot cereals, sweetened dried fruit and canned fruit in syrup can be high in added sugar

Use the Nutrition Facts table to compare products and make healthier choices. The percent daily value (% DV) shows if the food has a little or a lot of a nutrient: 5% DV or less is a little, 15% DV or more is a lot. Choose foods lower in sodium, sugar and saturated fat.

Will I get enough key nutrients on a vegetarian diet?

Vegetarian diets are a type of plant-based diet that excludes some or all animal foods. For example:

- Lacto-ovo vegetarian: excludes meat, poultry and seafood but includes eggs and dairy foods
- Vegan: excludes all animal foods

Well-planned vegetarian eating patterns can provide enough nutrients for people of all ages. Getting enough of some nutrients may take more planning:

Iron and zinc

Include sources of iron and zinc in meals and snacks each day. Whole grains, legumes, nuts, seeds, eggs and soy products like tofu are good sources.

Iron from plant foods is not as easily absorbed by the body as iron from animal foods. Pair iron-rich plant foods with foods high in vitamin C, such as oranges and sweet peppers, to increase absorption. For example, have a slice of whole grain toast with nut butter and an orange.

Calcium

Include several sources of calcium each day to meet your calcium needs. Foods that are high in calcium include:

- Fortified plant-based beverages and dairy products
- Tofu made with calcium. Look for calcium sulphate on the ingredient list

Dark green leafy vegetables and some legumes, nuts and seeds provide smaller amounts of calcium.

Vitamin D

Only a few foods contain vitamin D naturally, such as egg yolk. Fortified plant-based beverages, cow milk and margarine have added vitamin D. Most people do not get enough vitamin D from the foods they eat. A

daily supplement of vitamin D may be helpful to make sure you get enough.

Vitamin B12

Vitamin B12 is only found naturally in animal foods. Some plant foods have added vitamin B12, like fortified plant-based beverages and nutritional yeast. Read the Nutrition Facts table to be sure.

If you only eat plant foods, call 8-1-1 to speak with a dietitian about how to get enough vitamin B12.

For more information:

- Canada's food guide cooking with plant-based protein foods: <https://food-guide.canada.ca/en/cooking-skills/cooking-plant-based-protein-foods/>.