

The Plant-Based Diet

One of the trends predicted for 2020 is an increase in plant-based meals. Food companies are producing more and more food alternatives to replace meat and dairy items. Ingredients such as soy, peas, and nuts are being used creatively to offer consumers more choices to keep this health-conscious trend going. Most grocery stores today have a section dedicated to plant-based foods and the variety has grown significantly recently.

Not only for vegetarians and vegans, there is an increased trend with Americans to reduce their intake of animal foods. It's getting easier to find these options that are more nutritious. Nutritionally it is possible to thrive on a vegetarian or even a vegan dietary lifestyle. The challenge to get adequate amounts of protein and essential vitamins and minerals such as calcium, iron and vitamin B-12 which are more readily available in animal products.

While getting enough protein is the first concern, getting complete proteins are the bigger issue. Complete proteins are those that contain all nine essential amino acids required by the human body. Animal foods contain complete protein, while only a limited number of plant foods satisfy this need. Getting around this is done by eating a variety of plant-based ingredients to ensure getting the right mix of essential amino acids. Some plant foods are complete proteins such as quinoa and soybeans. Soybeans are used to make several kinds of ingredients such as tofu, tempeh and edamame. Tofu is a particularly important ingredient for those desiring a plant-based diet because it is so versatile. It takes on the flavor of the other ingredients it is cooked with which makes it very popular. Additionally, tofu, tempeh and edamame are also good sources of calcium and iron, which are often lacking in meatless dishes.

Nuts, beans, lentils and chickpeas are great protein-packed plant foods. There are also a good variety of grains that provide protein. These include quinoa, farro, chia seeds, amaranth, bulgur wheat, gamut and teff. Vegetables can also sprinkle some valuable protein into the diet. Choose dark, leafy greens such as kale, spinach and collards. Broccoli should also be eaten often as it not only offers protein but also several other nutrients such as fiber, calcium and vitamin C.

Fruits are a huge part of a plant-based diet. They are natural sources of vitamins and minerals, high in fiber and low in sodium and harmful fats. They are great as part of a meal (try grilled pineapple or banana slices in your oatmeal), great for dessert (berries and yogurt make a partial plant-based treat), and perfect for a snack (apple slices dipped in peanut butter are a perfect combination).