

Healthy Weight Loss With a Plant-Based Diet

PhysiciansCommittee
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A whole food, plant-based diet is the healthiest way to reach your weight loss goals.

Fruits, vegetables, grains, and legumes are high in fiber, which helps fill you up without adding extra calories, so you don't have to worry about portion sizes. Fiber also feeds good gut bacteria, which may improve your body's ability to turn food into energy.¹

A plant-based diet is also rich in complex carbohydrates that provide the fiber and nutrients necessary to maintain a healthy body weight. But it's important to minimize eating simple carbohydrates like white bread and sugary desserts, which are low in fiber.

Research shows that legumes like beans, peas, and lentils promote weight loss in those who eat them daily.² Beans are also a more satiating, or filling, source of protein than beef and better for weight loss.³

People who eat more grains, especially whole grains, also tend to have lower body weights than people who avoid them.⁴

Flavonoids, which are nutrients found in fruits and some vegetables, may also be helpful for weight maintenance. One study found that those who eat more berries, citrus fruits, and peppers have lower body weights than those who eat the least.⁵

Plant-based foods may also help increase your metabolism.⁶

Low-Carbohydrate Diets

Low-carbohydrate diets tend to result in reduced fiber intake and increased intake of animal protein, cholesterol, and saturated fat. Diets high in animal protein are linked with heart problems, diabetes, and certain forms of cancer.⁷⁻¹⁰ One benefit commonly associated with losing weight is an improvement in insulin sensitivity, which reduces risk for developing type 2 diabetes. However, research shows that women who lose weight on a high-protein diet do not gain this benefit.⁹ Diets that limit protein and focus mainly on fat, such as the keto diet, also increase the risk of heart disease, diabetes, and inflammation.^{11,12}

About three-quarters of daily calories should come from carbohydrates. Studies show that those who eat the most carbohydrates—especially those found in beans, grains, fruits, and vegetables—have a lower risk for heart disease, diabetes, and obesity.

Getting Started With a Plant-Based Diet

The best way to get started with a plant-based diet is to follow it completely for three weeks. That will give you enough time to adjust to new flavors, experience weight loss, and feel more energetic. It will also help you avoid lapses that can lead to weight gain.

If this sounds too challenging, make a plan to slowly work up to a 100% plant-based diet by having two or three vegan meals a week, and increase from there. The support of a friend or family member is also helpful.

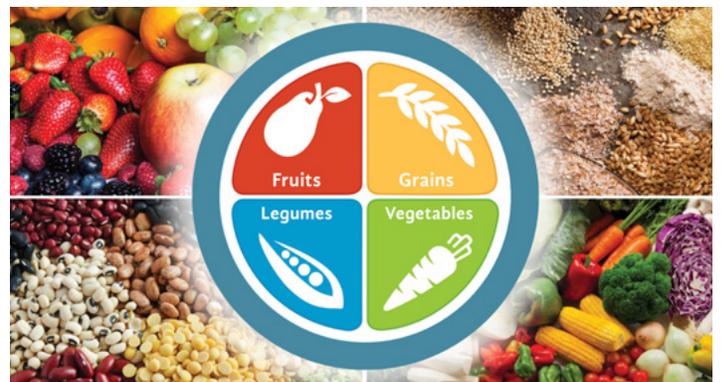
Let's get started! First, choose the day to start the diet. Weigh yourself before you start and keep track of your weight during the three weeks. Also, keep a record of what you are eating. Keeping a food record and a journal of how you feel while you're on the diet will help you monitor your progress. Below is a comprehensive guide to get you started. Good luck!

Plant-Based Diet Guidelines for Weight Loss

Overall Principles: Choose foods from minimally processed plant sources. Avoid all animal products, limit saturated fat, and keep vegetable oils to a bare minimum.

Focus on the Power Plate

The Power Plate—grains, legumes, vegetables, and fruit—provides all the nutrition you need. To meet your nutrient needs, make these foods the center of your plate for each meal. It's important to vary the foods you choose within the food groups because this helps you to cover all your nutritional bases.



Whole Grains

This group includes whole-wheat or sprouted bread, whole-wheat pasta, oatmeal, corn/polenta, millet, quinoa, brown rice, barley, bulgur, buckwheat groats, and whole-wheat or corn tortillas.

It's important to differentiate between whole grains and processed grains—whole-wheat versus white pasta, for example. Always choose the whole-grain version of any starches like rice, pasta, and bread.

Try to have a source of whole grains at every meal.



Information on Condiments and Beverages

For salad dressings and condiments, use lemon/lime juice, mustard, and/or vinegar. If using premade dressing, choose the nonfat varieties, such as fat-free Italian for salads.

Coffee and tea are generally safe, but make sure to use nondairy creamers and limit sweeteners.

Alcoholic beverages should be consumed in moderation at most. Remember to avoid

creamy, dairy-based drinks like White Russians.

Added sugars may be eaten occasionally. Small amounts of dark chocolate are usually low in sugar and dairy free. Fruit contains naturally occurring sugars, which make it a great dessert option.

Olive oil, vegan mayonnaise, and vegan buttery spreads can be used sparingly.

Nuts, nut butters, seeds, avocados, and olives are higher in calories than other plant foods but provide important nutrients. Use these foods as condiments or snacks but not as the bulk of a meal.

Legumes

This group includes all types of beans (e.g., black beans, kidney beans, black-eyed peas, pinto beans, navy beans), peas, lentils, soybeans (e.g., tofu, tempeh, edamame), and garbanzo beans. Even hummus and bean dips can be included.

When you avoid meat and dairy, legumes should replace these. They're an important source of protein, iron, and zinc.

Try to have a half cup of legumes at least twice a day.

Fruits

Eat fruit that is fresh, frozen, or canned (without heavy syrup) daily, including berries, apples, oranges, bananas, mangos, melons, peaches, and grapes.

Choose fruit in its whole form rather than as juice, which has no fiber.

Fruit makes a wonderful afternoon snack or a dessert.

Vegetables

Vegetables, both raw and cooked, should be eaten in abundance. Green vegetables like kale, spinach, collard greens, broccoli, and bok choy are especially nutrient dense and provide high amounts of iron, B vitamins, calcium, and vitamin C. Other vegetables to include are carrots, sweet potatoes, summer and winter squash, bell peppers, eggplant, onion, cabbage, etc.

These should be eaten multiple times a day and should generally take up half your plate.

Try snacking on fresh vegetables with hummus.

A Word on Portion Sizes

Provided that you are eating from the Power Plate, you should be able to eat until you are full without worrying about serving sizes. Pay attention to your own hunger cues to tell you when to stop eating. Our bodies tend to know how much food we need. Rather than focusing on calories or portion sizes, focus on high-quality, nutrient-dense meals.

Foods To Avoid

- Meats, poultry, fish, eggs (both whites and yolks), and all dairy products (regular and nonfat), including milk, yogurt, cheese, ice cream, cream, sour cream, and butter
- High-fat and highly processed meat and dairy alternatives like veggie sausages and soy cheese
- Fried foods, such as potato chips, french fries, onion rings, tempura, and doughnuts

A Word About ...

Protein: Plant foods have plenty of protein. An average woman needs about 46 grams of protein per day, and the average man about 56. Most vegetables, legumes, and grains contain this amount or more. Excellent protein sources include beans or lentils, nuts, seeds, and some grains like quinoa.

Calcium: Plant-based sources of calcium are widely available. Good sources include broccoli, kale, collard greens, mustard greens, beans, figs, fortified orange juice, fortified cereal, and fortified nondairy milks.

Vitamin B12: Vitamin B12 is made by microorganisms but only found in animal products and fortified foods, such as many breakfast cereals and nondairy milks. To ensure an adequate intake on this diet, it's recommended to take a B12 supplement of at least 25-100 micrograms per day.

Now that you know what foods to eat and what nutrients to look out for, it's time to figure out how to translate that into actual meals. Below is a listing of meal ideas for breakfast, lunch, dinner, desserts, and snacks so you can start stocking up on healthful options.

Weight Loss Meal Suggestions

For more recipes to help you with your plant-based journey, visit our [recipe database](#). For cooking tips and guidance, find a [Food for Life](#) class in your area. Lastly, if you need more personalized advice due to a health condition, for example, make an appointment with a vegan-friendly [health practitioner](#).

Breakfast

Often breakfast can be similar to the one you are accustomed to with a few simple modifications.

- Hot cereals: oatmeal, cream of wheat, creamy rice cereal, grits, or Irish oatmeal with cinnamon, raisins, and/or applesauce (no dairy milk)
- High-fiber cold cereals: wheat or oat bran cereals with nondairy milk and berries, peaches, or bananas
- Melons, such as cantaloupe and honeydew, or any other fruit
- Whole-grain or sprouted toast topped with peanut butter or hummus
- Oven-roasted potatoes with roasted mushrooms, peppers, and onions
- Tofu scramble with sauteed vegetables and potatoes/toast
- Breakfast burrito with tofu, beans, salsa, etc.

Lunch

Whether you dine in or out at lunchtime, there are lots of healthy and delicious options to choose from. Here are some ideas to get you started.

Salads

- Garden salad with lemon juice or a balsamic dressing topped with chickpeas
- Legume-based salads: three-bean, chickpea, lentil, or black bean and corn salads
- Grain-based salads: farro, wheat berries, or quinoa with cranberries, tomatoes, fresh parsley, pecans, and lentils

Soups

- Vegetable-based soups: potato-leek, carrot-ginger, mixed vegetable, or mushroom-barley
- Legume-based soups: black bean, vegetarian chili, lentil, minestrone, or split pea

Sandwiches/Wraps

- Hummus on bread or a whole-wheat pita with grated carrots, sprouts, and cucumbers
- Barbecue tofu sandwich on whole-grain bread with lettuce, tomato, avocado
- Black bean dip, peppers, tomatoes, and lettuce wrapped in a whole-wheat tortilla
- Black bean and sweet potato burrito with corn and tomatoes

Other Ideas and Add-Ons

- Last night's leftovers
- Fresh fruit, applesauce, or fruit cup packed in juice
- Cut-up vegetables with hummus
- Brown rice cakes, baked tortilla chips



Dinner

The evening meal is a good place to try new items. Start with a bean dish, some rice or another grain, or a potato dish and add a couple of vegetables.

Main Dishes

- Pasta marinara: Choose whole-wheat pasta and a vegetarian marinara sauce. Leave off the meat and cheese and add cooked lentils or navy beans for texture and protein.
- Beans and rice: Try black beans with salsa, vegetarian baked beans, or refried beans mixed into wild or brown rice.
- Soft tacos or fajitas: Prepare this dish with whole-wheat flour or corn tortillas, beans, lettuce, tomato, avocado, and salsa.
- Chili: Choose vegetarian premade or homemade versions.
- Veggie lasagna: Choose a lasagna made with whole-wheat noodles and tofu ricotta, layered with grilled veggies.
- Steamed brown rice and stir-fried vegetables: This meal can be seasoned with soy sauce. Use tofu or edamame instead of chicken.
- Veggie burgers: Make your own lentil/bean burgers or try premade frozen burgers. Choose those with ingredients you recognize and/or those with the fewest ingredients.



Desserts

- Fresh fruit
- Date and nut balls
- Sorbet
- Baked apples with cinnamon
- Banana nice cream
- Poached pears



Snacks

- Fruit, carrots, cucumber slices, or celery sticks
- Vegetarian instant soup cups (split pea, lentil, etc.)
- Toast with peanut butter and jam
- Baked tortilla chips with salsa or bean dip
- Popcorn without butter

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