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# The health benefits of plant-based foods

**Consumers are asking for healthier options.** In fact, a recent survey showed health as the primary driver of overall food choices. But what does "healthy" really mean when it comes to food? 52% of consumers believe plant-based is the way to go. The Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics supports appropriately planned vegetarian and vegan diets as nutritionally adequate, with the potential to offer long-term health benefits. Additionally, the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine supports plant-based diets as a method to reduce the risk of type 2 diabetes, certain types of cancer, and heart disease.

Why are plants such a nutrition powerhouse? One reason is **fiber**, a nutrient only found in plants. The average recommendation for daily fiber intake in adults is 25 grams for women and 38 grams for men, and fewer than 10% of Americans are meeting that.

Fiber has many functions in our bodies, including keeping us feeling full, aiding in digestion, and absorbing and removing cholesterol from our bodies. Given all of fiber's functions, it's no surprise plant-based diets are linked to a lower risk of colon cancer, lower cholesterol levels, improved cognitive function, and a longer lifespan.

Besides fiber, plants contribute a large number of other essential nutrients to our diets, including vitamin C, potassium, vitamin E, and magnesium. Plants also produce **phytonutrients**, which protect them from viruses and parasites. While phytonutrients are not essential to human bodies, consuming them can decrease the risk for several types of diseases. For example, isoflavones in soybeans can lower the risk of breast and prostate cancers.

## Heart health

A 30-year follow up of participants from three large cohort studies associated high plant protein intake with a lower risk of cardiovascular disease when compared to animal protein intake.

## Brain health

Consuming meat, especially red meat, is linked to an increased risk of developing Alzheimer's disease. Plant-based foods appear to be protective against cognitive decline.

## Diabetes

Plant-based diets can be an effective way to prevent and manage type 2 diabetes.

## What about protein?

A common misconception about plant-based meals is that they lack protein. But, there are many plant-based sources of protein, including lentils, tofu, tempeh, beans, nuts, seeds, and grains. Three ounces of tempeh, for example, contains 18 grams of protein. Our recipe database includes hundreds of plant-based recipes that are packed with protein, and will satisfy your customers.

## What about nutrients?

Plant-based or not, eating a variety of foods is important for ensuring our bodies have all the essential nutrients. Vitamin A is found in red-orange vegetables like carrots and sweet potato. Minerals like calcium, iron, and magnesium can be found in leafy green vegetables, calcium-set tofu, and nuts. Serving a variety of plant-based foods ensures customers have adequate options that satisfy both taste and nutrition needs.

## Plant-based foods are for everyone

### How plant-based products can fit into a healthy diet

The availability of plant-based products that mimic animal-based meat, cheese, and other common foods has increased in recent years. These products are often convenient, and can easily be added to menus using existing recipes. Because of their familiar taste and texture, these products can be a great way to introduce customers to plant-based cuisine.



How do these products compare to their animal-based counterparts? Because cholesterol only comes from animals, all fully plant-based products will be **cholesterol-free**. Similarly, because plants are the only source of fiber, many plant-based products meant to mimic animal-based meat naturally contain some **fiber**. Some products may be fortified with calcium, zinc, vitamin B<sub>12</sub>, and/or other vitamins and minerals for an added nutrient boost.

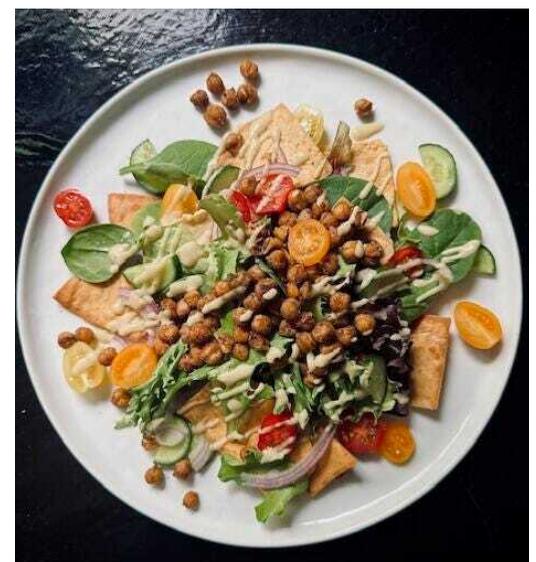
Not all plant-based products will be the same, so it's best to read the nutrition facts and ingredients label when looking at new items. Saturated fat and sodium content can vary among different brands, so be sure to take this into account when creating recipes and balanced menus. For example, if using a plant-based meat product that is higher in sodium, use less salt in the recipe or serve it with sides that are lower in sodium. Consult with our food service innovation team for additional tips and guidance on including plant-based convenience products on your menu.

There's something for everyone when it comes to plant-based food. When considering what plant-based dishes to add to your menus, remember that variety is the spice of life! Use plant-based meat and dairy products to recreate familiar foods, but mix it up with new dishes made with whole foods like beans, lentils, tofu, and tempeh for a winning combination that meets everyone's taste preferences!

### Plant-based foods are inclusive

It's not just vegetarian and vegan consumers that can reap the health benefits of plant-based meals. In fact, eating just a few plant-based meals a week can be beneficial over time. Many consumers are choosing to practice "flexitarian" diets, which lean towards plant-based foods without restrictions on animal products. Serving plant-based meals accommodates vegans, vegetarians, omnivores, and everyone in between.

Additionally, plant-based meals are inclusive of those with egg, dairy, fish, or shellfish allergies, and many other food allergies can often be accommodated by using foods like beans, lentils, quinoa, and oats.



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