How to help patients transition to a healthy and sustainable plant-based diet

Meat and dairy farming are a leading cause of climate change and ecological collapse. The most comprehensive analyses of the global farming system concluded that shifting to a plant-based diet would have the most impact on planetary health compared to any other single driver of climate change.¹

International consensus supports a global transition to a plant-based diet as an urgent imperative. The Eat-Lancet Commission on Food, Planet, Health² evaluated the best available science and developed recommendations for a global healthy reference diet, termed the 'Planetary Health Diet' (<https://eatforum.org/learn-and-discover/the-planetary-health-diet>).

This diet consists predominantly of whole plant foods, with minimal animal-derived and processed foods. Meat, eggs, and dairy are considered optional and if consumed, provide <13% of calories. Not only would this diet keep the global food system within planetary boundaries, it is estimated that it could prevent 11 million deaths annually from diet-related illnesses.² Health professionals are a trusted source of evidence-based information. As such, they are key players in helping patients transition to a plant-based diet. In reality, many lack the knowledge to counsel patients, yet implementing such change is well within our capabilities and aligned with current recommendations.³

The key components of a healthy plant-based diet are: fruits, vegetables, whole grains and beans, in approximately equal proportion, a small portion of nuts and seeds on most days, and water being the main beverage.⁴ All animal-derived foods are removed or minimised. Fish is considered the healthiest option for animal-derived food, although its consumption for a global population of 10 billion by 2050 is unsustainable. Some countries rely on aquaculture, but here in the UK, fish is not a dietary necessity.

There remain ingrained myths and fears about plant-based diets. Nutrients of concern are: protein, calcium, iron, iodine, omega-3 fatty acids, and vitamin B12; however, with some education and planning these can be easily obtained.⁵ Furthermore, plant-based

diets are abundant in nutrients such as fibre, potassium, magnesium, folate, antioxidants, and anti-inflammatory compounds that are often lacking in the typical British diet.

PATIENT ADVICE

Some straightforward advice to give your patients could include:

- Start with a healthy breakfast: porridge oats with a tablespoon of ground flaxseeds or chia seeds, for essential omega-3 fatty acids, and a portion of fruit. Use a fortified plant milk such as soya or oat.
- For main meals, swap out meat for beans, pulses, lentils, or chickpeas. For example, bean chilli, lentil bolognese, or tofu curry.
- Swap out refined grains for whole grains; brown rice, whole wheat bread, pasta and couscous, bulgur and buckwheat.
- Learn to make a variety of soups using different vegetables. Add beans or lentils to increase the protein and fibre content even further.
- Learn to love big salads. Add beans, lentils, or tofu, and top with seeds.
- Aim for 10 portions of fruits and vegetables daily, including as snacks.
- Eat a 30 g portion of nuts on most days.
- Calcium-set tofu is a rich source of calcium, as are leafy greens, beans, fortified plant milks, and yogurts.
- Good sources of iron include: chickpeas, lentil, tofu, cashew nuts, flaxseeds, pumpkin seeds, kale, dried figs and apricots, and raisins. Cooking with iron-cast cookware can help increase intake. To increase absorption, eat iron-rich foods with a source of vitamin C. Avoid tea and coffee an hour before and after meals.
- Don't forget iodine. It is present in sea vegetables and seaweeds, but their content is variable and if not consumed regularly a daily 150 mcg supplement is appropriate.
- On a 100% plant-based diet, a B12 supplement is required; 25–100 mcg daily or 2000 mcg weekly.

- In the winter months, or if sun exposure is inadequate, everyone in the UK should consider taking a vitamin D3 supplement.
- Reduce your food bill by cooking from scratch, bulk buying dry grains, beans, and pulses, using frozen and tinned fruits and vegetables, and batch cooking.
- Your patients will come from a variety of backgrounds and cultures. Many traditional cuisines like Indian and African are mostly plant-based already.

There are numerous resources available [for example, <https://plantbasedhealthprofessionals.com>] to help health professionals guide patients and community groups providing support (for example, <https://madeinhackney.org>). There will be circumstances when patients need to be guided by a nutritionist/dietitian. Nonetheless, doctors need to play their part and lead by example.

Shireen Kassam,

Consultant Haematologist, lifestyle medicine physician, and founder of Plant-Based Health Professionals UK.

Email: shireen.kassam@nhs.net
[@plantbasedhpuk](https://plantbasedhpuk)

Leila Dehghan,

Doctor-turned-Nutritionist and a member of the Advisory Board for Plant-Based Health Professionals UK.

Laura Freeman,

Dual licensed GP, Lifestyle Medicine Physician, and Medical Director of Plant-Based Health Online: <https://plantbasedhealthonline.com>

This article was first posted on *BJGP Life* on 30 December 2020; <https://bjgplife.com/plant-based>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3399/bjgp21X715121>

REFERENCES

1. Poore J, Nemecek T. Reducing food's environmental impacts through producers and consumers. *Science* 2018; **360**(6392): 987–992.
2. Willett W, Rockström J, Loken B, *et al*. Food in the Anthropocene: the EAT–Lancet Commission on healthy diets from sustainable food systems. *Lancet* 2019; **393**(10170): 447–492.
3. Wonca. *Declaration Calling for Family Doctors of the World to Act on Planetary Health*. Wonca, 2019.
4. Hever J. Plant-based diets: a physician's guide. *Perm J* 2016; **20**(3): 15–082.
5. British Dietetic Association confirms well-planned vegan diets can support healthy living in people of all ages. British Dietetic Association, 2017.

“... the Planetary Health Diet ... could prevent 11 million deaths annually from diet-related illnesses.”