**RD Resources for Consumers:**

**Therapeutic Use of Vegetarian/Vegan Diets in Chronic Disease**

Well-balanced vegetarian diets reduce risks of many chronic diseases, and may treat, improve or reverse obesity, heart disease, high blood pressure, type 2 diabetes, and some digestive problems. They also offer promise in treatment for cancer and kidney disease.

**Overweight / Obesity**

The high fiber and nutrient density (more nutrients for fewer calories) of vegetarian diets may support healthy weight loss. The fiber in beans, whole grains, fruits and vegetables may slow eating speed and food intake, which may provide longer-term fullness after meals; nutrient density may help limit hunger and cravings. Since obesity is a risk factor for most conditions discussed below, losing weight aids treatment of these other conditions.

**Heart Disease**

Vegetarian diets help treat heart disease by addressing obesity, and the low saturated fat content of plant foods helps your body reduce cholesterol production. Eating foods with soluble fiber, in foods like beans, barley, oats, and apples, reduces blood cholesterol levels. Plants contain thousands of plant chemicals and healthy oils that limit key steps in the disease process, thus reducing risk of heart attack and stroke.

**Type 2 Diabetes**

Weight loss helps treat diabetes as well; in fact, losing only 5-10% of your body weight tends to lower blood sugar. The high fiber content found in a vegetarian diet helps control blood sugar swings after meals, and the resulting fullness helps control portions, hunger cravings, and blood sugar spikes. Eating more whole grains may also supply greater amounts of nutrients essential to help your body use blood sugar more efficiently.

**Hypertension**

Losing weight also reduces blood pressure. Choose unprocessed plant foods as they are naturally low in sodium. Emphasize home-prepared foods with minimal added salt or salty ingredients. Reduce high-sodium foods like bread, breakfast cereals, cheese, bottled sauces, salad dressings, soups, processed foods and restaurant meals. Additionally, most fruits, vegetables and especially beans are high in potassium, magnesium and other compounds that help support healthy blood pressure.
Constipation and Diverticular Disease

High fiber foods reduce constipation and result in regular, smooth bowel movements. Soluble fiber attracts water to the colon, making stools soft and easy to pass, and supports healthy gut bacteria. It also helps to trap small inedible food particles that may otherwise become trapped in these pouches, causing pain and inflammation of diverticulosis, an out-pouching of the colon wall from using excessive force to move the bowels. Movement of stool is further enhanced with insoluble fiber found in the more sturdy parts of plant foods.

Chronic Kidney Failure

Diabetes and hypertension together significantly increase risk for chronic kidney disease. When vegetarian diets reduce blood sugar and blood pressure, kidney disease prognosis improves, more so in early on-set cases. A well-planned vegetarian diet is lower in protein and sodium and that limits further damage and may slow disease progression.

Cancer

Nutrition guidelines for cancer recovery from national and worldwide cancer research charities focus on prevention strategies of dietary principles: whole grains, beans, fruits and vegetables, and significantly limit red and processed meats. This approach also helps cancer patients who are obese or have heart disease. While research is ongoing, no data on cancer remission or death rates are available yet. And despite exaggerated concerns about the use of soy foods during breast cancer recovery, research now shows either no effect or small benefits.

Easing Digestive Issues

Many people avoid eating beans, a healthy and delicious protein alternative for vegetarians, because of difficult digestion. Check out these ways to reduce the gas, bloating and distention beans can produce.

- The culprit of flatulence (passing gas) with canned beans lies in the liquid. **Rinse canned beans to reduce gas.** Baked beans contain the liquid so expect more gas with this preparation.
- **Soak (8-10 hours) and rinse dried beans before cooking.**
- **Increase consumption slowly.** Start with more digestible types, like lentils and split peas. Then add black, pinto, garbanzo, kidney, cannellini, and other larger beans. Start with smaller portions and build up in frequency.
- **Mash or puree beans** (for burritos and soups) versus eating whole beans.

Summary

Well-designed vegetarian diets can help to reverse major chronic diseases, or at least limit the damage from these diseases. The potential benefits of using a well-balanced vegetarian diet as primary or adjunct therapy for chronic disease are almost unlimited. A registered dietitian nutritionist (RDN) can help you develop a healthy vegetarian dietary plan that meets your needs.

To find an RDN in your area, visit [www.eatright.org](http://www.eatright.org).

Vegetarian Nutrition

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