

All physicians should know the benefits of plant-based diets for these six health conditions

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A new commentary in the *American Journal of Lifestyle Medicine* says that all physicians should be aware of the benefits of a plant-based diet

for six health conditions: weight loss and maintenance, cardiovascular disease, cancer, diabetes, Alzheimer's disease, and COVID-19.

"The field of medicine, despite its prominent influence in society, has invested little to promote healthy lifestyle choices," says the commentary co-authored by Saray Stancic, MD, FACLM, director of medical education for the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine. "The consequence of this is reflected in our ever-rising chronic disease statistics, most notably obesity and diabetes rates."

Part of the problem, say the authors, is that "medical schools offer an anemic number of hours of nutrition education over 4 years," which does not improve in postgraduate training. They note that in a recent survey of more than 600 cardiologists, 90% reported they had not received needed nutrition education during training.

The commentary acknowledges that not all physicians must be experts in [nutrition](#), but says that they should at least have rudimentary knowledge of the benefits of a plant-based diet for these six conditions, for which they provide detailed evidence, including the following:

1. **Weight loss and maintenance.** A study of 70,000 people that found those who consumed a [vegan](#) diet weighed about 9 pounds less than those who did not. They also had a reduced risk of death.
2. **Cardiovascular disease.** Animal products are high in saturated fat and cholesterol, which are key drivers of [cardiovascular disease](#). But a recent metanalysis found that those consuming a vegetarian diet decreased LDL "bad" cholesterol by 13 mg/dl. Another analysis found a 24% lower rate of heart disease deaths among vegetarians compared to omnivores.
3. **Cancer.** Adopting healthy behaviors, which include remaining physically active and consuming diets rich in vegetables, fruits,

and whole grains, has the potential to reduce breast cancer risk by as much as 50-70%. Research also shows that diets that include soy and are high in fiber reduce breast cancer risk. Diets high in dairy products increase prostate cancer risk. High-fiber diets reduce colorectal [cancer](#) risk, while daily consumption of red and processed meat increases its risk.

4. **Diabetes.** A Harvard study, which included participants from the Health Professionals Follow-Up Study, Nurses' Health Study, and the Nurses' Health Study II, concluded that those who consumed a plant-based diet could expect a 34% reduction in type 2 [diabetes](#) risk.
5. **Alzheimer's disease.** A study found that those who adhered to the primarily plant-based Mediterranean-DASH Diet Intervention for Neurodegenerative Delay (MIND) diet, which is focused on brain-healthy foods such as green leafy vegetables, other vegetables, beans, berries, nuts, and whole grains, had a 60% lower risk of Alzheimer's disease.
6. **COVID-19.** Harvard's smartphone-based COVID-19 study found that in those who consumed a primarily plant-based diet, there was a 41% reduction in risk of severe COVID-19 as well as a 9% reduction in infection of any severity.

"It is time for all physicians across the globe to speak to the importance of diet and lifestyle in health," concludes the commentary, which recommends that physicians do this by counseling patients, assuring hospitals provide healthy menus, lecturing in the community, writing articles, using social media, and providing commentary to media.

Dr. Stancic will present "What Every Doctor Needs to Know About Nutrition" at the International Conference on Nutrition in Medicine taking place in Washington, D.C., from Aug. 18-20.

More information: Saray Stancic et al, Six Applications of Plant

Based Diets for Health Promotion, *American Journal of Lifestyle Medicine* (2022). [DOI: 10.1177/15598276221104023](https://doi.org/10.1177/15598276221104023)

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