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Plants Over Pills: A New Paradigm for the Management of Chronic Disease

We live in a country with the top hospitals and medical care in the world, yet Americans are dying in the greatest numbers from preventable diseases caused primarily by poor dietary choices.¹ The Standard American diet is literally feeding multiple disease states that are defining Americans: obesity, type 2 diabetes, and heart disease.² How did we get here?

Americans are so confused about what they should be eating. We are all bombarded by misinformation from all directions: whatever the fad diet of the year is, social media representing every nutrition angle possible, supermarkets full of unhealthy options, and the beef and dairy industry imparting their heavy-handed influence with billions of dollars spent on lobbyists and marketing (including an advertisement in the last RI Family Medicine newspaper with debatable information about infant feeding). It's no wonder people are confused.

Even doctors offer conflicting advice on nutrition. It's not surprising since we get little to no nutrition education in medical school. In addition, nutrition studies are quite hard to conduct and interpret, often contradicting one another. I've spent my professional career in search of the most accurate nutrition information to optimize human health beginning with an undergraduate degree in Nutrition Sciences, becoming a breastfeeding expert, training at Harvard for the Obesity Medicine boards, attending multiple lifestyle medicine and cardiology conferences, and receiving several nutrition certificates.

Here are 10 recommendations that most everyone can agree on:

1. Eat more whole fruits and vegetables - the entire rainbow, especially the leafy greens. They are full of antioxidants and vitamins, are heart healthy, are anti-inflammatory, and have anti-cancer properties.
2. Avoid sugar-sweetened and low-calorie sweetened beverages. The former provides empty calories and the latter messes with metabolism.^{3,4}
3. Eat more legumes like chickpeas, lentils, and black beans. They are full of fiber and are a low-fat, high protein food.
4. Eat grains in their whole form and avoid refined and processed flour products.
5. Eat more fiber. As fiber only comes from plants. (see 1, 3, and 4 above:)
6. Eat healthy fats – nuts, chia and flax seeds, avocados, olives. They are rich in health-promoting fatty acids.
7. Avoid saturated fats found in animal products like beef, pork, chicken, butter, and dairy as these lead to fatty liver, insulin resistance, and coronary artery disease.⁵
8. Avoid processed meats which the World Health Organization classified as a class 1 carcinogen in 2015. (Yet we still serve pepperoni pizza for school lunch?)⁶
9. Enjoy herbs and spices as they provide an array of anti-inflammatory properties and unique antioxidants.⁷



10. Drink plenty of water.

This is essentially a whole food plant-based diet (WFPB).

Evidence-based studies show that a primarily WFPB diet is best for human health. Research has demonstrated that a WFPB diet can prevent, improve, and reverse all of the following conditions: high blood pressure⁸, coronary artery disease (WFPB diet is the only diet that has been shown to reverse coronary artery plaque.⁹), high cholesterol⁸, type 2 diabetes¹⁰, obesity¹¹, and auto-immune diseases including asthma, multiple sclerosis, and psoriasis¹².

After 25 years of practicing medicine, I was frustrated that we are not addressing the importance of nutrition in health, both as a cause and as a cure. I believe the management of chronic diseases demands a new paradigm, one centered on the quality of the food we eat, rather than a pill or a surgical procedure. Out of my passion for food as medicine grew Plant Docs.

Plant Docs is a nonprofit organization created to educate the public and medical professionals about the research supporting whole food plant-based nutrition to prevent, improve and reverse chronic diseases. Plant Docs has several programs. Our signature program “Jumpstart Your Health!” is a one-month plant-based education and cooking program. We check labs before and after to assess for cholesterol, fatty liver, diabetes, and inflammation. After the program the participants receive a one-on-one consultation with one of the Plant Docs to go over their blood work and set nutrition goals.

The educational portion of the Jumpstart consists of two sessions that include understanding whole food plant-based nutrition, menu planning, nutrition label reading, and advice on eating out. Some tools that we recommend include Dr. Gregor’s “Daily Dozen” app

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and Dr. Neal Barnard's Power Plate, along with recipes from our website www.plantdocspvd.com. The two "cooking together" days are done over Zoom: participants cook in their own kitchens while the Plant Docs lead the way making breakfast, lunch, and dinner. This has been one of the most empowering aspects of our program that gives participants the confidence they need to cook healthy meals at home.

We have been collecting data since we started the Jumpstarts in July 2019 and have graduated over 150 participants. We are in the process of analyzing and publishing the results, which are similar to another Jumpstart program in Rochester, NY¹³. The statistically significant data includes the following results that were obtained in just one month: average weight loss of 5.1 pounds if BMI >30; average cholesterol drop of 38 for anyone with a starting cholesterol greater than 200; LDL drop of 22 for anyone with a starting LDL greater than 100; hs CRP drop of 2.5 for anyone with a starting value greater than 3.0. For the diabetics, we do see a significant drop in the hemoglobin A-1 C, reversal of prediabetes, and better glucose control with decreased need for diabetes medication.

I know how extremely difficult it is to change behavior, especially with regard to eating. What we choose to eat is so layered with emotions and influenced by family traditions, perceptions of comfort foods, and patterns of eating rituals. As a physician, I understand that during a typical patient encounter, there is not enough time to properly address changing one's diet.

Plant Docs is here as a partner and resource for community physicians to utilize for their patients who are interested in improving their nutrition as a more preventative and natural approach to reversing their chronic diseases. As Plant Docs grows, we will be looking to obtain grants to fund programs that target historically under-represented communities.

If anyone is interested in learning more about Plant Docs, or if you would like to send a representative from your practice to do a free Jumpstart, please contact us!



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