

# What is a plant-based diet and does it have any benefits?

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Here we discuss what defines a plant-based diet, its potential benefits, and provide some helpful tips for those looking to include more plant foods in their diet.

The phrase 'plant-based diet' seems to crop up everywhere these days, but what does it really mean? Well, it depends on whom you ask. Here we discuss what defines a plant-based diet, the potential benefits of eating a plant-based diet, and provide some helpful tips for those looking to shift to a more plant-based way of eating.

## What is a plant-based diet?

To date, there is no consensus on what defines a plant-based diet. It has been used to describe a variety of dietary patterns, ranging from a [Vegan diet](#) to a [Mediterranean diet](#). While these ways of eating differ in the amount of meat and dairy they contain, all descriptions of a plant-based diet largely focus on the promotion of healthy plant foods such as fruits, vegetables, whole grains, beans, pulses, nuts and seeds.

Although a plant-based diet is often used to describe a plant-only or vegan diet, it is not about the complete avoidance of animal products. Plant-based diets should be thought of as plant-forward diets or 'flexitarian' approaches, which emphasise eating healthy plant foods. While meat and dairy products are not necessarily avoided altogether, the frequency and portions that they are consumed will be reduced and most of the nutrients should come from healthy plant foods.

## What are the benefits of a healthy plant-based diet?

Plant-based diets have been praised for their benefit to our health and the environment.

### Health benefits of a plant-based diet

Plant-based diets are rich in fruits, vegetables, [whole grains](#), beans and pulses which are well known for their health benefits.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, it may come as no surprise that people who eat a plant-based diet rich in these healthy foods have a reduced risk of several diseases, including [heart disease](#), certain [cancers](#) and [type 2 diabetes](#).<sup>2,3,4</sup>

Like most healthy diets, the exact reason plant-based diets protect us against diseases is not fully understood. Their benefit is likely due to a combination of many factors, including a lower energy density, higher intakes of [vitamins](#), [minerals](#), unsaturated fats and [fibre](#), as well as a reduction in saturated fat, [sugars](#), salt and [red and processed meats](#). In addition, people who follow plant-based diets tend to be more health conscious and live healthier lifestyles (i.e. are less likely to smoke, more physically active and moderate alcohol drinkers) than the people they are compared to. Therefore, some of the observed

benefits for plant-based diets may be attributable to other health behaviours.<sup>5</sup>

## Environmental benefits of a plant-based diet

Our everyday food choices not only affect our health they also [affect the environment](#). Currently, the global food system contributes to approximately 20-35% of the world's greenhouse gas emissions and is a major driver of land conversion, deforestation and loss of biodiversity.<sup>6</sup> In general, animal products such as beef, lamb and dairy have a higher environmental impact (i.e. use more resources and produce more greenhouse gases) than plant-based sources such as soy, nuts and pulses.<sup>6</sup>

Shifting dietary patterns to include more healthy plant foods can benefit our health and the planet.<sup>7</sup> However, it is important to remember that sustainable eating is more than just reducing animal products, it is also about reducing food waste, eating more local and seasonal food and choosing more sustainable packaging.

### In summary

A healthy plant-based diet can benefit both our health and the planet. Transitioning to a more plant-based diet should focus on increasing healthy plant foods and worry less about reducing animal products.

## greenhouse gas emissions of protein rich foods

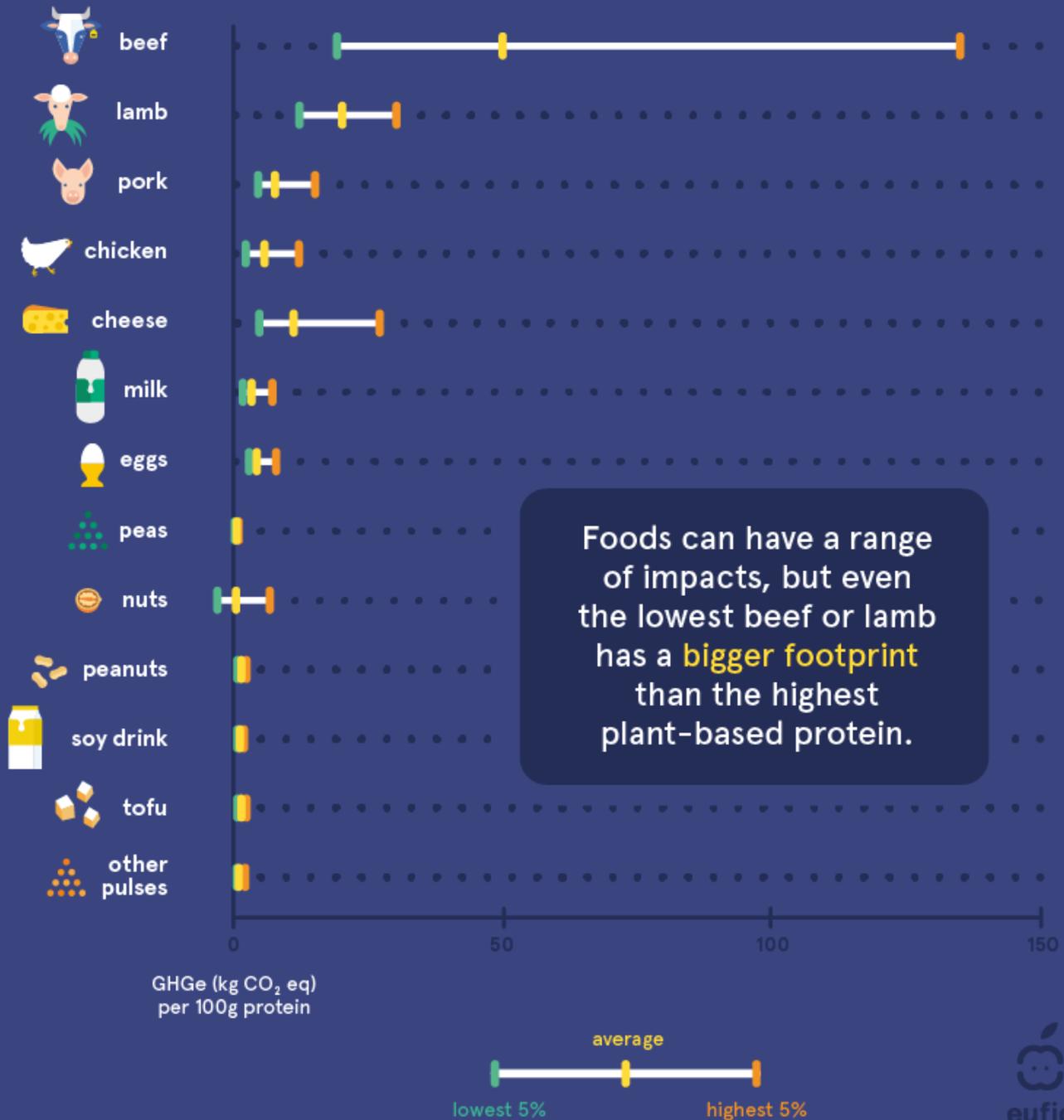


Figure 1. Green house gas emissions (GHGe) of protein rich foods.<sup>6</sup> Lowest 5% describes that 5% of production systems for that particular food emit that amount or less. Highest 5% means the top 5% of production systems for that particular food emit that amount or more.

Can a plant-based diet be unhealthy?

In short, Yes! Not all plant foods are created equal and just reducing animal products will not automatically lead to good health. Like all diets, both the quantity and quality of the diet are the deciding factors in determining their health benefit. A plant-based diet rich in plant foods high in fat, sugar and salt, will increase our risk of disease just like any other unhealthy diet.<sup>8</sup>

Plant-based meat alternatives have become extremely popular for those looking to reduce their consumption of animal products. While there is some evidence that these products have a lower environmental impact compared to meat, particularly beef, many products contain high amounts of [salt](#), which can have a negative effect on our health.<sup>9</sup> If you buy plant-based meat alternative make sure to check the label and choose low salt varieties.

People choosing to eliminate entire [food groups](#) are at increased risk of nutrient deficiencies. This includes plant-based diets that avoid all animal products – like [vegan diets](#) – if they are not adequately balanced with alternatives for those animal products. Although vegan diets can be perfectly healthy, particular care is needed to meet requirements for certain nutrients such as vitamin B12 as fortified foods and supplements are the only suitable sources.<sup>10</sup>

## Can you lose weight on a plant-based diet?

Contrary to popular belief, there is no ‘best’ diet for weight loss. All diets, whether low-fat, [low-carb](#) or even plant-based can be effective at reducing body weight as long you [burn more calories than you consume](#). To date, there is no convincing evidence to suggest that a plant-based diet is any more effective at reducing body weight than any other dietary pattern.<sup>11,12</sup>

Most diets will lead to weight loss in the short term but keeping that weight off can be difficult to maintain. Therefore, the ‘best’ diet for weight loss is the one that can be enjoyed and stuck to long-term.

## How do you get protein on a plant-based diet?

[Protein](#) is essential for the growth and repair of our cells and tissues. When it comes to a plant-based diet, most of the protein in the diet should come from plant foods such as beans, pulses and whole grains.

There is a common misconception that plant-based diets, particularly those with no animal products, lead to protein deficiencies. This is not true, as long as protein is consumed from a variety of plant sources, most adults can easily meet the [dietary reference value](#) (DRV) for protein of 0.83g per kg bodyweight per day (i.e. 58g/day for a 70 kg adult).<sup>10</sup> In fact, some evidences suggest that higher intakes of [plant-based protein](#) can have a protective effect on our long-term health.<sup>13</sup>

## How to eat a healthy plant-based diet?

Just because a food is made from a plant does not automatically make it healthy. Eating a healthy plant-based diet is about eating more healthy plant foods and limiting unhealthy plant foods. To help those



looking to eat a plant-based diet here are some helpful tips:

- Swap or reduce portions of meat by choosing plant-based proteins like beans, pulses and tofu
- Eat more fruits and vegetables, aim for at least 1-2 servings at every meal
- Limit foods and drinks high in fat, sugar and salt, such as crisps, sodas, chocolate, sweets, cakes and other desserts
- Choose whole grains over refined grains
- Choose unsalted nuts and seeds
- Use plant oils rich in unsaturated fat such as olive oil or rapeseed oil
- If replacing or reducing dairy products, use fortified alternatives like fortified soy drinks
- If replacing or reducing meat with plant-based meat alternatives, always [check the nutrition label](#) and choose varieties low in salt.

Like all diets, the key to adopting a healthy plant-based diet is about finding foods and meals you enjoy and can stick to long-term.

## swaps for a more plant-based diet

### BREAKFAST



sugar-sweetened cereal  
with full fat milk



unsweetened whole grain  
cereal with fortified soya drink,  
topped with berries & seeds



higher  
in fibre

lower in  
saturated  
fats

lower  
in sugar

### LUNCH



cream of chicken soup  
with white roll and butter



lentil soup with  
whole grain bread &  
unsaturated fat spread



higher  
in fibre

lower in  
saturated  
fats

### DINNER



bolognese using 20% fat  
mince with white spaghetti



bolognese using half 5% fat  
mince & half lentils with whole  
wheat spaghetti & side salad



higher  
in fibre

lower in  
saturated  
fats

Figure 2. Simple food swaps to eat a healthy plant-based diet.