

PERSONAL HEALTH

A Guide to Sustainable Eating

Have you considered the effects of what you eat on the planet, and made changes that will protect not only the Earth but also your health and the well-being of generations to come?



By Jane E. Brody

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I suspect most of you already do many things to help preserve the viability of the planet we all call home. Perhaps you recycle glass, plastic and paper and compost organic waste; shop with reusable bags; rely heavily on public transportation or bicycles or, failing that, at least drive fuel-efficient cars.

But have you given serious thought to the planetary effects of what you eat and made changes that will protect not only terra firma and surrounding waters but also your health and the well-being of generations to come?

In January, The New York Times described a comprehensive new report from the EAT-Lancet Commission on Food, Planet and Health. It was compiled by 37 scientists and other experts from 16 countries, with the aim of establishing a global food economy that could combat chronic diseases in wealthy nations like ours and provide better nutrition for poor ones, all without destroying the planet. The scientists' goal was to outline a healthy sustainable diet that could feed the nearly 10 billion people expected to inhabit the world by 2050.

For more than a century, most Americans have been eating far too high on the hog for the sake of their own health and the health of the planet. In 1900, two-thirds of our protein came not from animals but from plant foods. By 1985, that statistic was

reversed, with more than two-thirds of our protein coming from animals, primarily beef cattle. They consume up to eight pounds of grain to produce one pound of meat and release tons of greenhouse gases in the process while their saturated fat and calories contribute heavily to our high rates of chronic diseases.

As Dr. Walter C. Willett, professor of epidemiology and nutrition at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health and a contributor to the Lancet report told Nutrition Action Healthletter, “We simply cannot eat the amounts of beef that we’re now consuming and still have a future for our grandchildren.”

In an editorial, The Lancet wrote: “Intensive meat production is on an unstoppable trajectory comprising the single greatest contributor to climate change.

Humanity’s dominant diets are not good for us, and they are not good for the planet.”

The Lancet report does not insist that everyone become a vegetarian or vegan, but does set as a goal that people in wealthy countries limit consumption of red meat — beef and lamb in particular — to one 3-ounce serving a week, or one 6-ounce serving every two weeks. You can be somewhat more generous with pork, poultry and fish, which are better for your health and less damaging to the earth. The grain-to-meat ratio for poultry and hogs is only about 2.5 to 1, and the fat in fish is mostly unsaturated and high in omega-3 fatty acids.

But you would do best for your health and the planet by gradually adopting a diet that derives most of its protein from plants — including legumes and nuts — with farmed seafood as your primary animal food along with moderate amounts of poultry and eggs. The fact is, we don’t need nearly as much protein as most Americans now consume. Studies in both animals and people have shown that high-protein diets limit longevity.

Chickpeas and lentils account for a large percentage of the protein in my current diet, which has gradually become heavily plant-based. A favorite recipe starts with 2 cups of cubed butternut squash and 1 cup of coarsely chopped onion tossed with 1 tablespoon of olive oil, roasted on a sheet pan at 450 degrees for 20 minutes. Combine this with a 15-ounce can of drained chickpeas tossed with 2 teaspoons of

curry powder, ¼ teaspoon coarse salt and 1 tablespoon olive oil that has been roasted separately on a sheet pan for 15 minutes. Yum! For more ideas, check out Menus of Change 2018 conference recipes.

I often have what some may consider an unusual breakfast — soup laden with baby spinach and/or kale and roasted baby carrots, and a salad supper with salmon, tuna, low-fat chicken sausage, beans or chickpeas for protein. An alternate breakfast consists of slices of banana topped with peanut butter. Hummus on whole-wheat bread or crackers with grape tomatoes is a favorite lunch or snack.

Another critically important change is in our consumption of carbohydrates, nearly half of which come in the form of nutrition-deficient unhealthy carbs: mostly refined starches like white bread and white rice, added sugars and potatoes, all of which contribute to the rampant incidence of obesity and Type 2 diabetes in this country. Nearly all my carbohydrates come from beans, whole-grain breads and milk, and I'm gradually decreasing consumption of my favorite treat: low-fat ice cream.

As Dr. Willett pointed out, “Switching from refined starches to whole grains doesn't make a big difference to the environment, but it does for your health.”

My biggest failing vis-à-vis the EAT-Lancet dietary advice is the amount of dairy products — primarily nonfat, lactose-free milk and nonfat yogurt — I consume. Dr. Willett suggests only one serving a day while I usually consume three, making dairy a large portion of my protein and calcium intake.

Suggestions about dietary fats mimic those you've been hearing for years: stick with unsaturated vegetable oils like olive, canola, soybean and corn oils, but steer clear of palm oil, which is high in saturated fats *and* its production is responsible for massive destruction of tropical rain forests needed to protect both the earth's climate and diversity of wildlife.

Coconut oil is currently enjoying a moment in dietary fame; even though it is a highly saturated fat, the particular type of fat in coconut oil gives a greater-than-usual boost to blood levels of HDL cholesterol, which is considered heart-

protective. Dr. Willett suggests limiting it to occasional use, perhaps for Thai cooking or (do we dare?) making a pie crust or other baked goods that call for a solid fat.

The EAT-Lancet Commission emphasized that its advice to eat more plant-based foods and fewer foods from animals is “not a question of all or nothing, but rather small changes for a large and positive impact.” It pointed out that “foods sourced from animals, especially red meat, have relatively high environmental footprints per serving compared to other food groups,” which Dr. Willett called “unsustainable.”

But even if environmental issues are not high on your list of concerns, health should be. As the commission concluded, “Today, over two billion adults are overweight and obese, and diet-related noncommunicable diseases including diabetes, cancer and heart diseases are among the leading causes of global deaths,” risks now being exported worldwide.

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