People eat meat and think they will become strong as an ox, forgetting that the ox eats grass.

- Pino Caruso

Can adopting a vegetarian or vegan diet improve your health? According to the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics and the American College of Lifestyle Medicine, a vegan diet is associated with a lower risk of heart disease. In addition, people eating plant-based diets appear to have lower cholesterol levels, lower blood pressure and lower rates of type 2 diabetes than meat eaters. Vegans also tend to have a lower body mass index, lower overall cancer rates and lower risk of chronic disease. This sounds great, but knowing how to make the transition to a plant-based diet can be overwhelming and even confusing. Read on for answers to some common questions.

Vegetarian vs. Vegan: What is the difference?

A vegan diet excludes all meat, poultry, fish, eggs and dairy products. This is the most plant-focused diet. If this seems too limited for you or too much of a change from what you eat now, a vegetarian diet may feel like an easier transition. A vegetarian diet excludes meat, poultry and fish, but includes eggs and dairy products.

While there are many potential health benefits of adopting a plant-based diet, it’s important to be aware of the amount of processed foods you are consuming. Food that goes through a factory is often harmful food. Chips, dips and soft drinks can be vegan/vegetarian foods, but they may also be high in sodium or saturated fat. Too much saturated fat, sugar and salt from any source isn’t good for your health. So while there is an increasing number of plant-based options, such as veggie burgers, vegan baked goods and vegan cheese, some of these foods contain more salt, sugar or fat than regular products. Learning how to read food labels can be helpful as you work to select the foods that are best for you.

It’s important to remember that while there may be some potential health benefits to a plant-based lifestyle, some people have health concerns for which meat can be helpful. It’s a little bit of work learning how to eat a plant-based diet. However, there are plenty of choices, and the health benefits are amazing! If you need support, contact a registered dietician for individualized recommendations.

At Johns Hopkins Medicine, 60% of employees have blood pressure above normal levels. To address this issue, Healthy at Hopkins is offering its virtual Keep Your Pressure Down program. For more information about the program or to register for the next session, beginning Aug. 30, click here.

Ask the Expert

Every Thursday, noon–12:30 p.m.

Join a 30 minute Ask the Expert Session with Raychel Santo, with the Center for Livable Future's Food Production & Public Health, Food Communities & Public Health group to discuss meat substitutes such Impossible Burgers and Beyond meat. Learn more about the pros and cons of these meat substitutes.

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