

[IMAGE]

## Embracing a Plant-Based Diet: Tips From an Expert

### *New York Times Best-Selling Author Kathy Freston Answers Your Pressing Questions*

By Brenda Duran

When it comes to adopting a plant-based diet, many people find it overwhelming at the large volume of information out there. There are some experts who promote going vegan for the numerous health benefits it can offer such as lowering cholesterol, decreasing the risk of heart disease and overall weight loss.

Numerous studies also continue to show adopting a diet that is rich with greens and is often plant-based is the way to a longer, healthier life.

But, in our busy world with endless food options what does it mean to adopt a plant based diet? And, how is it possible to do so without feeling like you might be missing out on some essentials? We went to one of the experts for answers. New York Times best selling author Kathy Freston answered a few important questions for *To Your Health* readers this month on this topic.

Freston has focused her entire career on healthy living and conscious eating. Her books include *Veganist: Lose Weight, Get Healthy, Change the World*, *Quantum Wellness: A Practical and Spiritual Guide to Health and Happiness*, *The Quantum Wellness Cleanse: The 21 Day Essential Guide to Healing Your Body, Mind, and Spirit*, *The One: Discovering the Secrets of Soul Mate Love and Expect a Miracle: 7 Spiritual Steps to Finding the Right Relationship*.

Kathy Freston - Copyright © Stock Photo / Register Mark Her newest book is, *THE LEAN: A Revolutionary (and Simple!) 30-Day Plan for Healthy, Lasting Weight Loss*.

Freston is also known for promoting a body/mind/spirit approach to health and happiness that includes a concentration on healthy diet, emotional introspection, spiritual practice, and loving relationships, among other tenets. Freston continually cites the proven value of "leaning into" change and the benefits of "progress, not perfection."

Here are some of her tips and answers to help you decide if adopting a plant-based diet will work for you.

**TYH: What are the proven benefits of adopting a vegan/vegetarian diet that you have found through your research?**

**KF:** In *Veganist*, I sum up 10 game changing - and I mean game changing - promises that come as a result of going vegan. They are:

1. You will lose weight (if you need to, maintain if you don't).
2. You will greatly lower your risk of, and potentially even reverse, some major diseases like cancer, heart disease, and diabetes. In the first week of eating a healthy vegan diet, the weight begins to come off. Within the second week, your blood sugar and blood pressure drop. And by the third week, your cholesterol will have dropped significantly.
3. You will increase your longevity and quality of life (vegetarians live about 8 years longer than the average meat eater!) Dr. Dean Ornish is about to publish a study in *The Lancet* about how you can actually grow the length of your telomeres, affecting your longevity in a positive way, by eating a plant-based diet.
4. You will avoid nasty food poisoning and contamination (did you know that the vast majority of all food poisoning comes from animals... yes, even when it's a tomato recall; the bacteria actually is from animal poop).
5. You will save money both short term (on groceries) and long term (health care is very expensive, so if you stay healthy, you save money! And taxes for health care, well, you know how high that goes...)
6. You will do the single best thing you can do for the environment (animal agriculture is among the top 2 or 3 causes of every environmental problem from local to global, and the UN has determined that the livestock industry causes at least 18% of all the global warming gases, which is more than all forms of transportation put together. World Bank scientists have said that the number is actually closer to 51%.)
7. You will be feeding the global poor (grains fed to livestock would be better used to feed the poor, because it takes 16 lbs of grain to make 1 lb of beef, and it takes 10 calories of grain fed to an animal to produce 1 calorie of animal protein).
8. You will be reducing animal suffering by opting out of a cruel process of raising and slaughtering them
9. You will be in spiritual alignment with your values (eating consciously means you are being compassionate and kind which goes along with all the wisdom traditions and religions)

10. You will evolve as a human being, because you will be increasing your awareness, care, and concern for the world around you. This care and concern will ripple out and affect the culture in a positive way.

I know it's a lot, and that's what is so exciting to me: we are so empowered to make an enormous difference at every level, from personal to big picture. Going vegan is a grand slam, win-win move for everyone all around; there are not that many things you can actually do that make that big of a shift – and moving toward a plant-based (vegan) diet is one of them.

**TYH: Some people are concerned about getting enough protein as a vegan/vegetarian. What are some substitutes that meet the protein recommendations?**

**KF:** When people ask me about protein, I explain that protein is not a problem on a vegan diet, that the real problems that are plaguing us in the West are diabetes, heart disease, and cancer. All of that can be addressed with a vegan diet. Beans, nuts, seeds, lentils, and whole grains are packed with protein. If you like the occasional traditional goodies like sausage and burgers, you can opt for the plant-based alternatives of them which are full of protein but sans the cholesterol and saturated fat. All of these protein sources have some excellent benefits that animal protein does not--they contain plenty of fiber and complex carbohydrates, where meat has none.

According to Dr. Dean Ornish, "high-protein foods, particularly excessive animal protein, dramatically increase the risk of breast cancer, prostate cancer, heart disease, and many other illnesses. In the short run, they may also cause kidney problems, loss of calcium in the bones, and an unhealthy metabolic state called ketosis in many people."

**TYH: Another concern people tend to have is cost. What are the differences in cost, if any? Is it more expensive to eat this way?**

**KF:** As I talk to people about becoming vegan, one common refrain I hear is that it's too expensive. When funds are low, the cheap burger or basket of chicken can appear to be the best value—the greatest density of filling calories for the lowest price. We've been aggressively peddled the idea that a healthy diet is an expensive diet, something only for rich folks. And our experience seems to bear that out.

I understand the frustration. It doesn't seem right that meat should be so cheap (it's not, but more on that below) and fresh vegetables, especially organic ones, relatively expensive. But once you look into it, the true cost of eating animal protein is higher than you can imagine. And being vegan in your approach to food

is not only healthier by every measure but it can be considerably cheaper as well. In fact, many staples of vegetarian diets cost very little and can be found in any grocery store—not just in specialty markets. Whole grains like quinoa or barley or brown rice, legumes like chickpeas or soybeans, and other beans like black-eyed peas and black beans are very inexpensive – certainly cheaper than processed and packaged foods. Bought in bulk whole grains and beans can cost just pennies per meal. And because they are full of fiber they make you feel full and satisfied (put them into soups, stews, salads, burritos, etc.), without the dangerous saturated fat of animal protein. And if fresh vegetables and fruits aren't readily available for reasonable prices, you can opt for frozen; it's pretty darn close to being as healthy since the veggies are flash frozen quickly after harvest .

Not only is a healthful plant-based diet less expensive at the grocery store (unless you go crazy for packaged convenience foods, that is), it saves you personally and saves us societally in healthcare and many other direct and indirect costs. On the individual level alone, consider that your health insurance never pays for everything, even the Cadillac plans charge deductibles and disallow certain medications. Being sick is expensive. More than that, a huge part of our country's annual budget is given over to healthcare costs, paid for by your tax dollars. And indirect healthcare costs related to lost productivity adversely affect you in the form of higher taxes, too.

On the healthcare front, when you consider that meat and dairy foods clog our bodies with saturated fat, growth hormones, and antibiotics and have been conclusively linked to cancer, heart disease, and obesity, as well as a general "blah" feeling, it's certainly a lot less expensive – and less painful – to prevent debilitating diseases through our food choices than it is to treat them later (through bypass surgery or angioplasty, for example, which can run up tens of thousands of dollars in medical bills).

**TYH: What are some of the challenges most people have when starting a vegan/vegetarian diet?**

**KF:** One of the biggest challenges I've seen people struggle with when they want to lean into plant-based foods is that they deprive themselves of their traditional favorite foods like burgers and pizza and a Thanksgiving feast, so they feel left out and unfulfilled. But you don't have to give those things up; you can just have better versions of the things you grew up loving: veggie burgers, pizza made with nondairy cheese and veggie sausage, and meat alternative turkey with mashed potatoes made with soy milk and nondairy butter. Yes, whole foods (like grains and beans and fresh veggies) are best, but traditions tie us to our families and communities, and you can enjoy them even as you lean more and more toward the healthier

stuff.

**TYH: What are some simple ways to ease into a vegan/vegetarian diet?**

**KF:** I recommend "leaning in" to veganism – perhaps by giving up eating one animal at a time until you feel ready to give up the next. This way you give yourself the time and space to discover new foods that you like, and create new menus that are comfortable and convenient. So if you give up chicken, don't replace it with fish, but rather find delicious vegan options like black bean burritos with guacamole, or a Portobello mushroom burger and salad, or vegetable gumbo with soy sausage. And just "veganize" your favorite meals, for instance choosing Gardein chick'n scaloppini rather than the animal version, along with mashed potatoes made with soy or almond milk and Earth Balance butter, which is non-dairy. Once you get a comfortable rotation of favorite foods, you are set!

On the other hand, if you have a health issue or prefer to dive in full force, just do it! Go to your grocery or health food store or farmer's market and pick up lots of grains and beans, delicious veggies and sweet potatoes, or whatever strikes your fancy and get started! Just remember: progress, not perfection! Do the best you can, and keep leaning. If you aren't ready to go all the way, you can always be vegan-ish!

**TYH: Can you give us a sample diet plan that could work for anyone looking to start?**

**KF:** For breakfast, you might enjoy a bowl of brown rice (I make a big pot of it twice a week and keep it in the fridge) with chopped dates and raw almonds, with warmed soy or rice milk poured atop. Oatmeal is certainly great too; I just like to change it up with different grains. If you are on the run, you can have whole grain toast and peanut butter. For lunch, you could enjoy a black bean burrito with salsa and avocados along with a salad or some quinoa with veggies and chickpeas along with a thick butternut squash soup. And for dinner, you can "veganize" your family's favorite meal, as we talked about before. Make some brown rice pasta with a faux meat crumble as a Bolognese. Or cook up a stir fry with some tofu and some fresh veggies. Pizza is always a hit with the kids and you can make it with vegan cheese or even without cheese altogether; it's delicious!

**What are some important things to know before adopting a vegan/vegetarian lifestyle?**

**KF:** I've seen people go vegan and assume that as long as they are not eating anything from an animal they will thrive, and they live on bread and pasta and vegan cookies. But that won't fly long term; you have to be wise and make sure you are eating healthfully, which means a dipping into a diverse array of wholesome,

nutrient dense foods. If you just eat empty (albeit vegan) calories, you won't have energy and your health won't soar.

It's also recommended that you take vitamin B<sub>12</sub>; B<sub>12</sub> is made, not by plants or animals, but by bacteria. Theoretically, in a natural environment the bacteria on plants or on the soil might have produced traces of B<sub>12</sub>, but this certainly is not a reliable source nowadays. Animals, like humans, naturally take in dirt with their food, and thus have bacteria in their intestines; and these bacteria produce B<sub>12</sub>, which seeps into the flesh. So if you eat animal flesh, you get some B<sub>12</sub>, but you also get a load of fat and cholesterol. Because we humans aren't eating dirt mixed in with our food anymore, the best solution is to supplement with a common multivitamin which contains B<sub>12</sub>.

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