



# Flourishing as a Family on a Whole-Food, Plant-Based Diet

By Erin Stanczyk  
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My dad is a physician, and we kept fairly healthy habits at home growing up. In high school, I was an athlete and straight-A student. But once I got to college, my healthy lifestyle was derailed. I started living off fast food, beef jerky, and instant noodles. I stayed out late partying and slept in late. I quit exercising.

I began gaining a significant amount of weight, and I started to experience anxiety, depression, and debilitating panic attacks, which I'd never had before. All of this was coupled with a slew of inexplicable and disheartening health symptoms: numbness and tingling in my fingers and toes, brain fog, overall weakness, and low energy.

In search of answers, I turned to Google, which quickly became my best friend and worst enemy. I was convinced that I had multiple sclerosis or some other sort of scary autoimmune disease. I come from a family of doctors, so I was able to easily seek medical advice and was soon visiting specialists for MRIs, CT scans, and way too much blood work. I even participated in a nerve conduction study. I had [high cholesterol](#), which we chalked up to my genes. Beyond that, physicians couldn't give me any sort of diagnosis, nor could they prescribe a drug to fix my many problems. I was at a loss. Though I hadn't been diagnosed with a disorder or disease, I was still very much in a state of dis-ease.

## Stumbling in Search of Better Health

Toward the end of college, Dusty and I got together, and began getting healthier as a couple. Like me, Dusty had been an athlete in high school but had gotten off track in college. We began riding road bikes long distances, cooking together, and going out less. Unfortunately, in my attempts to lose the weight I had gained at college, I began counting calories; subsisting on low-calorie, highly processed foods like Lean Cuisines; and overexercising. I lost too much weight, and the foods I did eat were not giving me the nutrients and nourishment I needed. I began to look emaciated. Dusty, meanwhile, struggled with acid reflux and chronic gastrointestinal issues.

Eventually, my uncle (a cardiologist) invited Dusty and me to hear a doctor speak about nutrition at a local hospital. The doctor turned out to be Caldwell Esselstyn, MD. We were impressed by his data on the health benefits of a whole-food, plant-based diet, and we tried some of the food he'd brought. We were so intrigued that we went home and watched the [Forks Over Knives documentary film](#). We weren't sure about taking the plunge into going completely plant-based, so we started out going vegetarian for 40 days for Lent.

## Motivated by Early Results

We wondered if we'd be able to get enough nutrients (especially [protein](#)) without meat. Well, we made it to Easter, and to our surprise, we didn't die from a "lack of protein." In fact, we felt amazing!

We continued on, slowly eliminating [dairy](#) and eventually [eggs](#). We had blood work done after a few weeks, and my "hereditary" high cholesterol had dropped into what Michael Greger, MD, would call the "heart attack-proof" zone. Dusty's cholesterol (which had also been high) had dropped to within the healthy range, too. Seeing our numbers change for the better was all the convincing we needed.

We turned to the [Forks Over Knives Recipe App](#) to find healthy plant-based recipes to replace our old standard American diet foods. It took some time to fully trust that we were getting what we needed without animal products. For guidance, we were constantly referring to the Forks Over Knives website and reading articles regarding [B12](#), [omega-3s](#), and more.

Dusty's nagging acid reflux and digestive woes subsided over time as his gut healed. And the best part for me: My mental health

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improved drastically. Within just a couple months of this way of eating, I no longer had unmanageable anxiety. I felt less stressed. I had no feelings of depression whatsoever, and my panic attacks completely left me. I was again able to socialize normally and sleep through the night.

It took some time to trust that I could stay at a healthy weight while eating a lot of [carbs](#) and not restricting calories. However, I tried it, incorporating lots of delicious raw fruits and veggies as well as hearty cooked dishes. I've found that I'm now able to get more toned and muscular in the gym; I've put on some healthy weight and am feeling the most comfortable I've ever been in my body and in my heart! Some of our go-to meals now include stews with red lentils, sweet potatoes, and lots of chopped veggies seasoned with herbs and spices, as well as grain bowls with steamed greens, brown rice, chickpeas, potatoes, and avocado.

We've been on this plant-powered path for about six years. We've got a healthy and happy vegan 2-year-old, with baby No. 2 on the way this July. Today we coach others on achieving healthy and sustainable lifestyles.

*Ready to get started? Check out [Forks Meal Planner](#), FOK's easy weekly meal-planning tool to keep you on a healthy plant-based path. To learn more about a whole-food, plant-based diet, visit our [Plant-Based Primer](#).*