I come from a family who ate like most Americans eat, and got the diseases that many Americans get. I lost my father to liver cancer, my mom to leukemia, my sister to brain cancer, and my grandparents to heart disease and cancer.

The pain of losing so many family members took its toll. I became bogged down in grief. At the same time, I was going a mile a minute in my professional life, attending the Culinary Institute of America and becoming a chef. Between the grief and stress, I stopped taking care of myself. My health began to deteriorate until one day I woke up and weighed 679 pounds. I remember looking in the mirror and thinking, “Who is this person?” At just 34 years old, I had Type 2 diabetes, liver disease, and kidney disease so severe that my kidneys had shrunk down to the size of walnuts. My blood pressure was so high that anytime I went to the doctor, they sent me to the emergency room after seeing my blood pressure.

The Spinal Injury

One day in 2016, I was out walking my little dog. He was playing and getting into something he shouldn’t have been, so I bent over to grab him. When I did, I felt and heard a pop. I sat down on the curb and thought, “Something is wrong.” The left side of my body started to quickly go numb. Luckily, I live across the street from a city hospital, so I staggered my way over there. By the time I got seen by the desk nurse, I’d lost almost all feeling from the neck down. I weighed almost 700 pounds and couldn’t lift myself, couldn’t help the hospital staff help me. It was an awful feeling.

Once they had me stabilized, I learned that a disc had slipped so violently out of the side of my spine that it pulled my spinal cord out of place. The doctors told me that I most likely would never be able to walk again, and that I’d need to prepare to live in a wheelchair and need 24-hour care.

Life-Changing Reading

I spent many months in the hospital, working with occupational therapists and eventually getting some feeling back in my hands. After about five months, I was able to go to the hospital library in a wheelchair to look through books. That’s when I came across The Engine 2 Diet by Rip Esselstyn, which outlined a plan for transforming your health, starting with a 28-day diet focused on unprocessed plant-based foods. I’d heard about plant-based diets before, back when my mom was going through cancer treatment and I was looking for things that might help her. At the time, I was reluctant to really consider overhauling the way I thought about food. But now, in the hospital and desperate to regain more function and mobility, I knew that I had to give it a try.

The hospital had few plant-based options, so my lovely wife would come to visit and bring me fruit and quinoa and things like that. I ate a lot of apples and grapes every day. And I saw changes almost immediately. The dark circles under my eyes began to recede, and color returned to my skin. My legs had been like balloons; they were just so puffy that I barely even had discernible toes. But after a few weeks of this new way of eating, the puffiness in my legs went down so much that I finally had toes. And I was able to start wiggling them. After a routine scan, my doctor told me that he didn’t know what I was doing but that the amount of inflammation in my spine, midsection, and legs had significantly gone down.

Surviving Setbacks

I continued to regain more movement in my arms. But because I was still unable to get up and walk, I was at a higher risk for blood clots. My mom was a nurse, and I knew the symptoms, so when I started experiencing tightness in my chest one day, I knew immediately that I was experiencing a pulmonary embolism (a blood clot that traveled from my leg to my lungs). I technically died and was revived by the doctors twice that day. I was very grateful to have survived that ordeal.
I Lost 400 Pounds, Reversed 3 Chronic Diseases on a Whole-Food Vegan Diet

By Josh Carrero
May 20 2022

Afterward, I continued focusing on eating plant-based, and continued shedding weight. My blood pressure went down so significantly that my doctors took me off my blood pressure medications. They were over the moon.

In January 2017, after nine months in the hospital, I was finally discharged. A month later, I was hit with another health crisis when I noticed a large lump on the side of my neck—something my excess weight and beard had probably camouflaged until that point. I thought, “Here we go.” And sure enough, it turned out to be cancer: stage 4 non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma. The new diagnosis gave me even more motivation to eat as healthy as possible, so that my body would have the best chance to heal itself.

Thriving Today

Five years later, I’m still here. My cancer is in remission. My liver and kidney disease are in full remission, and I haven’t had diabetes in more than four years. I still have some neuropathy in the left side of my lower half, but with the help of occupational therapists, I’ve been able to regain function in my upper body and right leg, and I’m able to walk. I’ve lost more than 400 pounds. When I first got out of the hospital, I had to take 22 pills a day. Today, I take three vitamins. That’s it.

I still eat a lot. In fact, I eat more now than I ever did before, in terms of volume. I eat bags of greens a day, and a whole lot of fruit, quinoa, and beans. Every morning, I enjoy a smoothie made with greens, peaches, or berries. I try to keep it very simple because I’m a creature of habit. I choose not to eat vegan imitation meats and cheese, as I try to avoid highly processed foods. But I do tend to refer to myself as “vegan” rather than “plant-based,” because I’m definitely in this for the animals, too. Eating meat never quite seemed right to me (especially after having to visit a slaughterhouse floor when I was working as a chef).

I was unable to return to work as a chef directly, because of the neuropathy in my leg. Instead, I develop plant-based menus for gyms and help them to set up plant-based educational workshops. I also help other people who are transitioning from being an able-bodied person to being a disabled person. I’m passionate about fitness and work out daily, doing almost two hours of bodybuilding and adaptive CrossFit, which is for people who have disabilities.

People are always asking me how I made this miraculous health transformation, thinking there must be some secret trick, and I tell them to just try this diet for themselves. I’m a Puerto Rican dude from New York who never thought I would be plant-based. If I can do it, you can. Give it a chance. See how your body responds. What you put into your body either feeds sickness or helps fight it, plain and simple. I’m living proof.

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.