



# Culinary Medicine at NYU: Dr. Sara Zayed's Mission to Revolutionize Medical Education

By Megan Edwards  
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Recent medical school graduate Sara Zayed, MD, traded a career in software engineering to pursue a plant-based primary care practice. But she's not just helping patients: By spearheading a Culinary Medicine curriculum at NYU, she's changing the game for doctors in training. FOK spoke with Zayed about her transition into the medical world, why she believes plant-based nutrition education is essential for the next generation of doctors, and how daily rituals play a large role in her health.

## What made you decide to go plant-based and switch careers?

**Sara Zayed:** I lost my father to a heart attack. Before he passed away, someone had gifted him *Eat to Live* by Joel Fuhrman, M.D. So it was just laying around his house, and one day I picked it up, and it all clicked. I'd been having migraines, acne, and poor sleep. I [went plant-based and] was shocked by how much better I felt. Software engineering has its value, but I realized I wanted to have a direct impact on people. I started working as a medical assistant at [Ethos Primary Care](#) in New Jersey, where I saw how powerful plant-based nutrition can be. Patients would lose dozens of pounds they never expected to lose, or safely go off medications, saying they felt like they had a new lease on life. It was very moving.

## What inspired you to spearhead a plant-based nutrition course at your med school,

## NYU Grossman?

**SZ:** I received really quality medical training, but the curriculum only had a sprinkling of hours that focused on nutrition. So [the Culinary Medicine program] was birthed from the very real need for students to receive more in-depth training. I think nutrition is viewed only as a preventative measure and not as a tool that people in all sectors of the medical field can use to treat patients. For example, a surgeon who's spending all their time in the operating room could use nutrition to help patients recover from surgery faster—or avoid it altogether. One of the patients we worked with at Ethos Primary Care was scheduled for knee surgery, but after changing her diet and lifestyle, she no longer needed it.

## What do students learn in the course?

**SZ:** It's seven sessions total. The first lecture focuses on the evidence behind plant-based nutrition. Then there are three didactic sessions where students learn about chronic ailments such as diabetes, cancer, and cardiovascular disease. Those lectures are paired with interactive sessions in a professional kitchen where they learn how to cook plant-based meals. The whole idea is that if you know how to apply these principles to your own life, then you're going to be more effective at counseling patients about it.

## How did students respond to last year's introduction of the Culinary Medicine curriculum?

**SZ:** One hundred percent of students said that they would recommend the program, and we saw a significant increase in those who said they were now comfortable with their knowledge for counseling patients.

## How has your Muslim faith influenced your perspective on medicine?

**SZ:** Something I always tell people is that our bodies are an amanah, an Arabic word which means trust. We've

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been entrusted with these bodies. When we treat our bodies poorly, it's like damaging something that's been loaned to us for safekeeping. If you're chronically ill and don't have energy, then you can't spend time with your family, you can't be productive, you can't serve others, and it's harder to turn inwards and connect with God. Think of Maslow's hierarchy of needs: If you aren't getting the basic needs of health and safety met, you can't self-actualize and fulfill your life's purpose. Apart from a WFPB diet, I feel strongly about embodying the other pillars of lifestyle medicine, which are sleep, exercise, mindfulness, and social connection. I try to always get 7 to 8 hours of sleep, work out every day, and meditate each morning for at least 10 minutes.

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

## What impact do you hope to make as you begin your primary care practice?

**SZ:** A pet peeve of mine is the idea that patients aren't interested in changing their diet. During my year of rotations so many patients said, "I don't want to go on lots of medications. What else can I try?" The reality is that most doctors have a deficit in knowledge about how to counsel patients on changing their lifestyles, so we shy away from it. Having WFPB nutrition training as a primary care doctor can make a huge difference.

## 3 Tips for Creating a Sustainable Meditation Practice

As a proponent of lifestyle medicine, Zayed is passionate about starting each day with a few minutes of mindfulness. Check out her tips for trying a morning meditation routine.

- 1. Avoid setting "goals" for a meditation session.** The purpose is to nonjudgmentally explore whatever arises in your mind, heart, and body so you can feel centered as you start the day.
- 2. Close your eyes and choose something to focus on, such as your breath or a sensation in your body.** Notice how your experience of that focal point may change or deepen as time passes.
- 3. If your mind wanders, gently draw your attention back to your object of focus.** It's normal to have thoughts; see if you can allow them to come and go with loving kindness and avoid getting fixated on one thing.