



From Skeptic to Believer: Why I Ditched Paleo for a Plant-Based Diet

By Daniel Chong ND
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As far back as I can remember, my father instilled in me the value of a healthy lifestyle. Though I know now that what he thought of as “healthy” was a bit off, it was the thought that counted, and it led me to always strive to eat well. At the very least, it inspired me to add some veggies to the otherwise terrible meals my high school buddies and I devoured every day.

In college, my interest in health grew, as I battled mild but [persistent acne](#). One day I ventured into a New Age bookstore and thumbed through a book on healthy living to find the section on skincare. To my astonishment, the top recommendation to help reduce acne was to cut out dairy. I decided to try it and see what happened. Within a week, my skin started to clear up. Within a month, it looked better than it had in years. I resolved to make it my profession to help others achieve health through diet and lifestyle changes.

During my training as a naturopath in the late 1990s, I was taught that vegetarian diets were healthiest, but my skeptical nature had me thinking otherwise. So when I stumbled upon the concept of “[Paleolithic nutrition](#)”—which holds that humans are best suited to low-carb, high-fat diets—I was intrigued. I read the few books available on the subject at the time. The reasoning appealed to me, and I ended up spending the first 10 years or so of my practice following this approach and teaching it to my patients, with, at times, good results.

From Paleo to Plant-Based: The

Experiment Begins

About 15 years ago, I made the decision to focus my practice on the prevention and treatment of cardiovascular disease. As a physician whose primary tool was lifestyle medicine, my efforts to better understand the causes and the best drug-free (or at least drug-limiting) treatment options brought me to the work of Caldwell Esselstyn, M.D. I learned how he was able to help patients dramatically improve their cardiovascular health using a whole-food, plant-based (WFPB) diet. I was shocked: a [high-carb, low-fat vegan diet](#)?! I thought this was unhealthy, even deadly. But the more evidence I reviewed, the more I saw that Esselstyn was correct.

It was a challenging time. I’d really believed I was helping patients over the previous decade. Now I realized that by encouraging them to eat paleo, I may have harmed them in the long run. I accepted that I needed to learn more about the WFPB way of eating. It was time for a new experiment: I would go WFPB for six weeks, before deciding whether to recommend it to my patients. I’m an all-or-nothing type of person, so I took the plunge overnight.

Seeing the Evidence Firsthand

It took a few weeks for my intestines to adjust to the increase in dietary fiber, but after that, I started really feeling good. I noticed more of a lightness to my physical and mental state, more energy, and less stiffness upon waking.

There were other surprising benefits, too. I’ve been involved in different sports throughout my life and am still an avid basketball player. Prior to going WFPB, I was less and less able to recover from hard play in a timely fashion. After making the switch, I started recovering much more quickly.

I like to run bloodwork on myself every few months, and prior to going plant-based, I had a slightly higher C-reactive protein (a marker of inflammation) than I would have expected. Within a couple months of going WFPB, my CRP dropped to an undetectable level, and my

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cholesterol dropped to a range that would make any cardiologist think I was taking a statin. Seeing those numbers convinced me to commit to this 180-degree turn in my personal life and medical practice: I was all in on WFPB.

The Right Choice

It has been 13 years since then, and I can say without a doubt it was the right choice. I've continued to enjoy intense workouts, quick recovery times, and low [inflammation](#) and [low cholesterol](#)—as well as delicious plant-based meals. Some of my favorites lately include black bean tacos, lentil soup, and tofu scrambles with potatoes and veggies.

I am so grateful to have discovered the benefits of WFPB eating. My patients and I are much better off for it.

Beyond Diet: 4 Pillars of Heart Health

A healthy plant-based diet is the most powerful tool in my arsenal for helping patients optimize their heart health in the long term. Many other aspects of our lives and habits can have an impact. These are four areas outside the realm of eating that I focus on with clients in my naturopathic medicine practice.

1. Don't skip the dentist.

Unhealthy teeth and gums can become a reservoir of harmful bacteria that can leach into your bloodstream and injure blood vessels, making them more vulnerable to plaque formation. Regular dental checkups and cleanings can go a long way toward maintaining heart health!

2. Prioritize sleep.

Poor sleep in general has a negative impact on many aspects of health and resiliency, and [sleep apnea](#) is an especially potent contributor to poor cardiovascular health. If you snore, wake often during the night, and/or don't feel well rested in the morning, talk to your doctor about having your sleep evaluated.

3. Move frequently.

Sitting for too long is harmful, even if you get in a daily workout at some point during the day. To all my patients, I recommend making a point of frequently getting up and moving around briefly throughout a day when they'd otherwise be sitting.

4. Extend your exhale.

Take about 5 minutes twice a day to focus on [slow breathing](#), where each exhale is about twice as long as the inhale. This reduces sympathetic nerve activity and can help alleviate stress and lower blood pressure.

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](#).