



From Rock Bottom to New Heights: My Plant-Based Recovery from Liver Disease

By Karen Roy
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For much of my life, my diet mainly consisted of sweets, sodas, fast food, and other [ultra-processed foods](#). But after I was diagnosed with cervical cancer in 2016, I was motivated to reconsider how I ate. My husband began researching the links between nutrition and cancer, and he shared fascinating studies and documentaries with me. I was amazed to learn how harmful that meat, dairy, and processed foods are to our health. I dove into the research myself and found Forks Over Knives, the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine, [the Esselstyns](#), and various podcasts featuring testimonials from people who reversed cancer and chronic diseases with a plant-based diet.

I decided to go vegan. A few weeks later, before I began chemotherapy, scans showed that the tumor had already shrunk. It felt like things were looking up.

Struggling to Maintain a Healthy Diet

I continued to try to minimize meat and dairy during and after treatment, but with four kids at home and a husband who likes to travel and eat out a lot, I found it nearly impossible to stick to it. I struggled to truly embrace vegetables, since I'd never really eaten many vegetables before. Finally, after a year or so of being mostly vegan, I reverted back to a standard American diet, beginning my downward spiral.

Fast-forward to December 2017. I was at the gym,

attempting to regain some energy and get back in shape after treatment. But I couldn't shake what I thought must have been late chemo symptoms, including fatigue, severe joint pain, and brain fog. I found myself tongue-tied all the time, and even the names of people I'd known my whole life were eluding me.

The more time passed, the worse it got. I developed a stammer. Discouraged, I found myself crying on my husband's shoulder many nights. My oncologist tried to reassure me that this would all pass, that my body was recovering from chemo. But I knew something was really wrong. It was not normal to feel faint and short of breath just from doing simple household tasks.

A New Diagnosis: Primary Biliary Cholangitis

After almost a year of different doctors, lab work, and imaging, I finally received a new diagnosis: primary biliary cholangitis (PBC). PBC is an [autoimmune disease](#) affecting the bile ducts, and it eventually leads to scarring or cirrhosis of the liver.

Over the next two years I suffered from debilitating pain, fatigue, ocular migraines, severe dry mouth and eyes, bleeding, and cracking lips. I made multiple trips to the ER. Eventually, it became so unbearable that I knew what I had to do. I had asked myself a hundred times why I ever quit the plant-based diet, but it took hitting rock bottom before I finally came to my senses and jumped headfirst into a whole-food, plant-based diet.

Embracing a Whole-Food, Plant-Based Lifestyle

I got back on track in the fall of 2020, turning to resources such as the [Physicians Committee](#), Forks Over Knives, and plant-based YouTube channels. Within a day of adopting a WFPB diet, I found I had more energy. By Day 2, the joint pain was gone. Within a week, my mouth was making enough saliva again. Within a month, all of the many symptoms I'd been experiencing disappeared. Finally, I could live my life and do all the little things that we tend to take for

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granted when we're healthy.

It's been four years of eating WFPB, and I remain symptom-free. It's an amazing feeling. Today I love snacking on different fruits, especially dates. I drink lots of smoothies and typically eat salads for dinner. It's fun finding new dressing recipes!

Family and friends have been super supportive of my lifestyle. They are fascinated that I don't count macros or care how much [protein](#) I'm getting. Many people I know decided to convert to a WFPB diet after seeing my results. This inspired me to become a certified health coach and nutritionist. Now it brings me so much joy to help other women go plant-based. My story has taken a turn for the better: What once seemed to be my defeat turned out to be my purpose.

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](#).