



'I Fully Expected to Die from This': How a Whole-Food, Plant-Based Diet Helped Me Heal from a Debilitating Condition

By Wendy Barto
2025-06-09 09:32:39



In April 1999, during a trip to France, I woke up with my bottom lip swollen to twice its normal size. I assumed I'd eaten something I was allergic to. But when I got home to Canada, the swelling kept happening—on my arms, my feet, my face. I was eventually diagnosed with idiopathic angioedema, a chronic condition that causes unpredictable swelling beneath the skin. My doctor told me there was no cure.

A Life Shaped by Fear

For the next 20 years, I lived with weekly flare-ups that disfigured my face and sometimes caused my throat to swell shut. The worst part was the uncertainty: I never knew when it would strike, and there was no known cause. My job as a 911 dispatcher made things even harder. I worked rotating 12-hour shifts, which threw off my [sleep](#) and likely triggered episodes. Still, the angioedema didn't stop when I was off work or on vacation, so stress couldn't have been the only factor.

When the swelling started, I'd rush to the ER and wait hours to get an epinephrine shot. Eventually, a compassionate doctor gave me prednisone instead, and that became my go-to. But prednisone came with side effects—especially insomnia—and lack of sleep often triggered another episode. I was caught in a vicious cycle: My top lip would go down just as my bottom lip started to swell. One eye would open, and the other

would close. Sometimes, the swelling reached my throat and I'd sit upright in bed wondering if it was time to call an ambulance.

I always carried prednisone and wore a medical alert bracelet. I made note of every food I ate and tracked every flare-up, desperate to find a pattern. I worried I'd have an episode on one of my daughters' wedding days. I worried my throat would close up during the night and I'd die, and I had nightmares about this. The only people I ever let see my swollen face were my husband and children. The condition dictated where I went, how long I stayed, and whether I felt safe showing my face in public.

An Unexpected Turning Point

Then in February 2019, I was diagnosed with Graves' disease, an [autoimmune disorder](#) that causes hyperthyroidism. I began seeing an endocrinologist regularly for bloodwork, scans, and a biopsy. Around that same time, my husband and I [watched Forks Over Knives](#) and other nutrition documentaries, and we decided to try a [whole-food, plant-based \(WFPB\) diet](#) together. He thought he'd do it for a month. He never went back.

At my next appointment, I told my endocrinologist about our new lifestyle. She flat-out told me that what I ate wouldn't affect my thyroid. But every time I came in for labs, my numbers had improved. After six months, they were fully normalized. "You've healed yourself without any help from me," she said. "Whatever you're doing, keep doing it—it's working."

My New Chapter: Unburdened of Angioedema

Just normalizing my thyroid levels would have been amazing enough. But over the next few years, I began noticing something even more life-changing: My angioedema flare-ups were less frequent. At first, I was hesitant to believe it. I'd been through too much. But I

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started keeping a log again, and sure enough, instead of every week, episodes were happening every few weeks. Then once a month. Then every couple of months. And when they did happen, the swelling was milder, and I didn't need nearly as much prednisone—sometimes just one pill instead of 10.

In 2023, I had only a couple of episodes. In 2024 and so far in 2025, I've had none.

I truly believe the change is linked to giving up animal products. On the rare occasions when I've strayed from a strict WFPB diet—eating a bit of dairy or egg—I noticed flare-ups returning soon after. My doctors still won't credit diet for the change. But I know what I've experienced. For more than two decades, I lived in fear, at the mercy of a disease that medicine told me had no known cause and no known cure. I fully expected to die someday from this condition. And now, it's gone.

I'm sharing my story because I wish someone had told me this was possible 20 years ago. It could have saved me thousands of prednisone pills, countless missed workdays, and years of emotional pain. I'm not saying WFPB eating will cure everyone with idiopathic angioedema. But it's worth asking: *What if it could?*

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.