



After Breast Cancer Returned, I Took Control of My Health with a Whole-Food, Plant-Based Diet

By Arlene Krell
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Before Arlene adopted a plant-based lifestyle, she felt trapped in a cycle of exhaustion and weight gain, convinced that growing older meant feeling worse.

I gradually put on excess pounds over the course of my adult life. During the last couple years of my marriage, I was working long hours, and my weight ballooned up to 165 pounds. I was uncomfortable in my own skin. But I thought that's just what getting older was like. It had been that way for my parents—why should I be any different?

Discovering Plant-Based Eating

My journey to a whole-food, plant-based diet began when a work associate told me about the documentary *What the Health*. She had lost some weight after going vegan, and I was intrigued. My ex-husband had been obsessed with eating lots of protein and meat, but we'd just divorced; I was living on my own and able to shop and cook just for myself. I decided to see what all the fuss was about. I watched *What the Health* and several other documentaries about healthy eating, including *Forks Over Knives*.

A few days later, I decided to give veganism a try. I ate pretty much anything that didn't have animal products in it, [ultraprocessed foods](#) included. Over the next few months, I felt better and lost some weight—but then I plateaued. I figured I was doing fine.

A Wake-Up Call

A few years passed, and in 2019, I was diagnosed with a recurrence of breast cancer. Even though it was caught early, at stage 1, my doctor recommended a mastectomy, because it was my second time having breast cancer. I tried to look on the bright side—at least I'd be getting implants and wouldn't have sagging “old lady boobies” anymore—but deep down, I felt discouraged. I thought the vegan diet was supposed to protect me. Feeling deflated, I even bought a dozen eggs to cook during my recovery.

While recuperating from surgery, I had plenty of time to think—and to research. My oncologist had warned me that if the [cancer](#) came back again, it would be hard to treat. I was determined to find a better way to eat. I revisited many of the same documentaries I'd watched before, including *Forks Over Knives*. This time, something clicked: I realized I'd been doing it all wrong. I'd gone [vegan](#), but I hadn't eliminated oil. I'd thought, “How much difference could oil make?” Apparently, a lot. I had been consuming plenty of it in dressings, stir-fries, french fries, nondairy ice cream—you name it.

Committing to Whole-Food, Plant-Based

Six days after surgery, I committed fully to a whole-food, plant-based diet, free of ultraprocessed foods and oil, and I didn't look back. Over the next six months, I dropped 25 pounds. That's when I realized I wasn't “big boned,” as my parents had always said. That was a big aha moment.

Now, six years later, I hover around 120 pounds—and I'm cancer-free. Every year, I celebrate my “WFPB-versary” and mastectomy anniversary by sharing an update in the Forks Over Knives Facebook group.

Thriving in My 70s

Do I stray from the WFPB path? Sure, when I eat out. Traveling is the hardest; from my experience, I've

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learned it's almost impossible to eat out without some oil sneaking in. But I try to always eat vegan, at least. At home, I stay very true to the WFPB diet, because I control what goes into each meal.

At 73, I'm retired but very active. I don't take any prescription meds. My dog and I walk about a mile most mornings (I wear a weighted vest), and I do around 150 minutes of yoga and Pilates each week on my mat at home. I'm currently directing a seniors' community theater production. Showtime is in November! With my adult kids and granddaughter nearby, my life feels full and joyful. I'm the happiest I've ever been.

Go, plants!

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.