

Plant-Based Nutrition Support Group Drives Health in the Motor City

By Joel Kahn, MD
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Although we see daily signs that plant-based eating is on the rise, in the 25 years I have been counseling my cardiology patients to adopt such a diet, it has been challenging to convince them long term. Undoubtedly a neighbor, family member, coworker, or some other pundit would try to derail their efforts. It seems everyone is a nutritionist when you announce that you are embracing a vegan lifestyle. What can be done to improve the odds of long-term success?

In the past few years, I have come to appreciate the power of support groups in strengthening our will to succeed and persevere when we make a decision as momentous as eschewing all animal products. I saw this firsthand in my visit to Pastor Rick Warren's Saddleback Church in Southern California where, beginning in 2011, the "Daniel Plan" spread a plant-based health message through this massive church. The result? Some 15,000 parishioners collectively shed more than 250,000 pounds in one year. This success was built on small groups of people sharing, celebrating, and comparing notes regularly, as they made major changes in their routines.

Hoping for the same impact for heart patients, I cofounded a program in Detroit earlier this year, teaching plant-based nutrition using group activities. When I was asked to do this, I figured I could round up a dozen or two dedicated heart warriors to meet with once a month. A small article appeared in a local paper, and I also invited all the patients I knew who were seeking to eliminate meat, eggs, and dairy.

On a cold night in February of this year (2014), in a room at my hospital designed to hold 60, people kept streaming in, until more than 130 souls packed the auditorium. To this day, I have no idea where they all came from. I spoke on the scientific basis for preventing heart disease with a whole food, plant-based no-added-oil diet, and several people shared their stories.

Over the following months, our dedicated all-volunteer "PBN" (Plant-Based Nutrition) Support Group scheduled monthly lectures, organized a walking club, and visited restaurants that were willing to prepare a special vegan menu for 20 to 50 people. We also [created a website](#). Our lecture meetings have drawn over 100 attendees every month, often with many new faces, and we quickly generated a list of well over 300 email addresses.

Recently, we stepped up the excitement by having our first out-of-town speaker, Rip Esselstyn, talk to our PBNers. With the help of a bit of advertising by a national grocer, we filled a high school auditorium with over 475 faces, all eager to learn the secrets of thriving with plants in a world dominated by meat eaters. The energy, excitement, and appreciation were amazing.

In less than seven months, many dedicated participants have lost 20 to 40 pounds, reduced or eliminated medications, and developed new eating habits ... largely because they shared their journey with like-minded companions. Our group has inspired more people to commit to a vegan lifestyle during this time frame than I had in my entire previous 25 years of practice!

We plan to continue meeting in large groups, to host small-group study sessions, and to celebrate the holidays together.

An African proverb states, "if you want to walk fast, walk alone. If you want to walk far, walk together." It has been exciting to be involved with a great group of people committed to taking that long, healthy walk together. I encourage you to start up a similar group of your own!