



University of Florida Hospital Launches Plant-Based Patient Menu

By Tami Fertig
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You couldn't always order a tofu vegetable stir-fry or lentil bolognese at the University of Florida Health Shands Hospital in Gainesville, Fla. But thanks to a [recently introduced plant-based menu](#), recovering cardiac and vascular patients now have a variety of meatless options for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. "My mission from the get-go has been to modify the nutrition program," says Monica Aggarwal, MD, FACC, the hospital's director of integrative cardiology and prevention who spearheaded the menu project. Aggarwal herself gave up eating animal products after being diagnosed with Rheumatoid arthritis six years ago. She credits her ability to reverse her illness and come off all her medications to the changes in her diet. (Read more about her [plant-based success story here](#).) We recently chatted with Aggarwal about her ongoing efforts to bring healthier meals and education to patients.

FOK: What motivated you to launch a plant-based menu at the hospital?

Aggarwal: Typically, patients come in after having a heart attack—they may get an intervention like a stent procedure or something more serious like a bypass procedure, or maybe they get put on lots of medication—and while they're in the hospital, they eat hamburgers or French fries or other high-fat foods. Then they leave with very little education about what they can do to change their lives. Unfortunately, this is not a University of Florida issue; it's a national problem. I've always had the intention of changing that model.

FOK: Are there other aspects of the nutrition program you plan to change

Aggarwal: We're trying to change the whole concept. Imagine a paradigm where you get to the hospital and somebody says, "You've had a heart attack, but we're going to take care of this. We're going to look at your arteries, see if you need a procedure done, and if not, we're going to put you on some really good medication. And then we're going to motivate you and teach you. We'll have a nurse educator discuss lifestyle changes, and the dietary group discuss nutrition changes. Then, when you leave the hospital, you'll leave with a packet of information on what to eat and what to avoid eating."

FOK: How have your colleagues responded? Any challenges along the way

Aggarwal: There are *a lot* of challenges with trying to change a meal plan. I had to push for a year and a half. The dietary staff were concerned about customer satisfaction, which is important because hospitals are judged by the food that they serve. There were a lot of comments like, "People in the South are used to a certain type of food, and they're not going to be so inclined to eat hummus or foods they've never heard of." We brought in nurses to do food tastings, and the dietary staff were pleasantly surprised by everyone's positive reactions.

FOK: What are the most popular menu items so far?

Aggarwal: The Fresh Vegetable Wrap and the Chickpea Potato Coconut Curry. They're good; they're fresh; they're nourishing. There are loads of vegetables on the menu. I was really trying to make it very appealing—something that everyone would enjoy eating. There's so much fear that when you tell people to eat plants, they're going to have to eat rabbit food. When they actually try it, they say, "This is delicious!" They're blown away that it's all healthy.

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.