How a Vegan Diet Impacts Diabetes

By Courtney Davison
July 08 2019

More than 370 million people around the world suffer from diabetes, and about 100 million Americans have diabetes or are likely to get it. Being diagnosed with type 1 diabetes, type 2 diabetes, or prediabetes is a life-changing experience, but we have some good news.

Research shows that moving to a whole-food, plant-based (WFPB) diet can reduce the symptoms of type 1 diabetes and can help manage and even reverse type 2 diabetes and prediabetes. Cutting out fat-laden animal products and highly processed foods can also dramatically reduce your risk of developing diabetes in the first place.

Let’s dig into the research.

A Whole-Food, Plant-Based Diet Can Reduce Type 2 Diabetes Risk by a Third

In 2016, the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health released a study that shows the healthiest plant-based diets can lower the risk of type 2 diabetes by around a third. Just switching out animal products for delicious plant-based alternatives can lower your risk by 20 percent. A whole-food, plant-based diet is rich in beneficial dietary fiber, antioxidants, and micronutrients, and low in saturated fat. This is excellent for overall health outcomes, whether they’re related to diabetes or not.

A Whole-Food, Plant-Based Diet Can Help Manage or Reverse Type 2 Diabetes

A 2018 report published in BMJ Open Diabetes Research & Care found that “plant-based diets were associated with significant improvement in emotional well-being, physical well-being, depression ... general health, HbA1c levels, weight, total cholesterol, and low-density lipoprotein cholesterol, compared with several diabetic associations’ official guidelines.” They also found that plant-based diets showed potential to improve diabetic neuropathic pain and triglyceride levels in type 2 diabetes patients.

WFPB diets can even reverse type 2 diabetes by resolving the root cause: insulin resistance.

Essentially, WFPB nutrition can help to manage the symptoms of type 1 diabetes and could halt or reverse prediabetes and type 2 diabetes.

A Whole-Food, Plant-Based Diet Can Reduce Problems Associated with Type 1 Diabetes

Eliminating animal products and moving to a diet rich in whole and minimally processed plant foods can significantly reduce the problems created by type 1 and type 1.5 autoimmune diabetes. Although there's no cure for this type of diabetes, the right diet has plenty of benefits. Cyrus Khambatta, PhD, writes that following a low-fat, WFPB lifestyle can:

- Boost insulin sensitivity and reduce insulin use by more than 40 percent after six months.
- Lead to more predictable blood glucose, making it easier to manage diabetes.
- Increase blood flow to tissues in the body and reduce the likelihood of diabetes-related nerve damage.
- Reduce the burden on the kidneys, decreasing the chances of getting kidney disease.

Additionally, a WFPB diet can increase your energy levels and help you lose weight, and you get to indulge in delicious comfort foods!

Real-Life Success Stories: People with Diabetes See Significant Health Improvements on a WFPB Diet

Real-life case studies support the notion that eliminating animal products and following a healthy, whole food diet can make it easier to live with diabetes.
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Ken Thomas Has Managed Type 1 Diabetes for 30 Years

“I am grateful to Forks Over Knives for filling the gaps between experience and science. And I am grateful for the gifts my diabetes has provided me. At age 62 I am stronger yet lighter, and I have more energy and stamina than I did at 50, 40, or even 30! I see no sign that my vitality is peaking, and I no longer have any idea where ‘middle age’ is. What a profound difference from my original prognosis a quarter century ago.” — Ken Thomas

Marc Ramirez Reversed His Type 2 Diabetes

“I now follow three basic guidelines: I eat no animal products, I eat low-fat foods, and I avoid high-glycemic foods. I enjoy meals like oatmeal with cinnamon and raisins, pasta primavera, bean burritos, veggie subs, veggie burgers, and plenty of fruits and vegetables such as strawberries and sweet potatoes.” — Marc Ramirez

You can find more success stories by people who have used a WFPB diet to manage, halt, and even reverse diabetes:

- My Patient Didn't Just Control His Diabetes, He Cured It!
- I'm the Brooklyn Borough President, and I Reversed My Diabetes with a Plant-Based Diet
- How this “Junk Food Vegan” Reversed Type 2 Diabetes After Over 20 Years of Battling the Disease
- Goodbye to Type 2 Diabetes, Meds, and a Lifetime of Dieting
- How My Patient Beat Prediabetes and Won a Decade-Long Weight-Loss Battle

If you have, or are at risk of developing, diabetes, a WFPB diet can be a game-changer. It’s easy to make the switch: Start by reading our Plant-Based Primer, and when you’re ready, visit the Forks Over Knives Tools section for support and resources.