Eating less meat? Good for you! And good for the planet

By Aaron Warnick

Reducing the amount of meat you eat can be good for your health, good for the environment and even good for your budget.

While the majority of Americans eat meat regularly — only 5% of U.S. adults considered themselves vegetarians as of 2018 — almost a quarter say they are eating less meat. The main reason they report cutting back is health concerns — and they have good reason to be worried. Eating a lot of red and processed meats is linked to higher risks for heart disease, stroke, colon cancer and early death.

Scaling down meat consumption, on the other hand, can help reduce obesity, increase life expectancy and improve the nutritional quality of your diet. That's because when people cut back on meat, they're more likely to replace it with healthier options.

Fortunately, you don't have to give up meat altogether to get some health improvements. You can start by cutting back the amount of meat on your plate at each meal, or eat meat in just one meal a day, for example.

You can even challenge yourself to go meatless one day a week. Mondays is the perfect day to do it, according to the Meatless Mondays initiative. Research shows that when people do something healthy at the start of the week, they're more likely to continue it.

"Making a one-day change or trying a new plant-based dish once a week often leads to other changes, such as trying a vegetarian meal when eating out, eating less meat the rest of the week, trying new recipes at home or eating more vegetables," says Becky Ramsing, MPH, RDN, a Meatless Mondays advisor and senior program officer at Johns Hopkins University Center for a Livable Future.

While cutting down your meat consumption is good for your health and heart, there's even greater benefits if you introduce more vegetables to your diet. Ultimately, a diet that reduces meat in favor of veggies, fruits, legumes, whole grains and nuts is better for your health.

A common fear from those looking to reduce their meat intake is that they won't get enough protein. The truth is most people consume much more dietary protein than their body needs. And there is plenty of protein in non-meat foods.

>> For more tips on eating less meat, visit www.meatlessMondays.org

Good plant-based sources of protein include beans, nuts and lentils. Eggs and dairy also contain protein. The key is to make sure that you're getting some of these protein-rich foods throughout your day, Ramsing says.

Besides health benefits, another reason people say they're cutting back on meat is to help protect the environment. Producing, processing and transporting meat requires massive supplies of pesticides, fertilizer, feed, water and fuel. The meat industry also creates greenhouse gases that add to climate change and manure that pollutes water.

Simply put, "reducing the amount of meat you eat is better for the planet," Ramsing says.

Eating less meat doesn't have to be expensive. In fact, you will probably save money. As Ramsing puts it, "On average, it costs several times more to purchase a pound of meat than pound of beans."

You don't have to go to expensive, high-end grocery stores to get quality ingredients for your new veggie cuisine. If you're worried about fresh produce spoiling before you can eat it, make dishes in advance and freeze them to use throughout the week. Casseroles, stews and soups all freeze well and taste just as good when heated up.

For people who feel they need a big serving of protein, meat substitutes are an option. But a less-expensive product such as barbeque mushrooms can also satisfy your hunger. Or you can make your own falafel. With the right recipe, you may never miss meat at all.
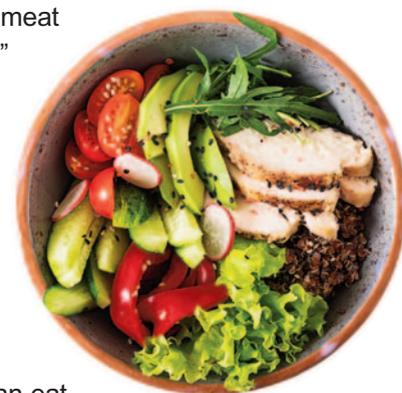
6 strategies to cut back on meat

If you're used to eating meat at every meal, it may be hard to decide where and how to cut down. Check out these tips to get started:

◆ Make half of your plate fruits and vegetables.

◆ Load up on greens: Green vegetables such as broccoli, spinach and green beans will not only fill you up, they will give you a big nutritional boost. If you're eating lettuce, steer yourself toward Romaine and darker leaves, as they have more nutrients than iceberg.

◆ Choose whole grains — such as brown rice or oatmeal — as they're more filling than refined grains.

◆ Seek out new recipes. There are many international dishes in particular that aren't built around on meat, such as curries, soups and pasta.

◆ Think differently: When making chili or meat-based stews, reduce the amount of meat and add a can of beans. Check out plant-based proteins, such as legumes, beans, peas and lentils. Try nuts, seeds and hummus as snack options.

◆ Be a more mindful eater. Instead of quickly shoveling food into your mouth, think about the positive impact you're making, whether it's on your health, the environment or your wallet.

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