

BECOME A FLEXITARIAN

This easy-to-follow four-week plan will have you eating less meat and more veggies—and loving it!



It's no secret that veggies trump meat when it comes to eating for better health. But, man, is it tough to say "No, thanks" to a juicy steak or a mouthwatering slice of roast chicken. So don't!

More nutrition and health experts are encouraging Americans to dip their toes into a "flexitarian" diet. This eating plan recommends that about half (or more) of your meals each week be built around vegetables and plant-based proteins. "Since you're eating more vegetables and whole grains, you're getting more fiber, which is something lacking in the standard American diet," says registered dietitian Lindsey Pine, owner of TastyBalance Nutrition in Los Angeles.

There are plenty of reasons to jump on board the flexitarian train. You'll lower your risk of hypertension, improve your cholesterol levels, and gain greater protection against cancer and type-2 diabetes. And then there's the all-important weight factor: Studies show that people who eat a plant-based diet weigh less than meat eaters.

Ready to give it a try? We've got you covered with a simple four-week plan that will have you happily saying, "More vegetables, please."

WEEK 1

GET THE PERFECT BLEND

Meat, chicken and fish may be your go-to proteins, but there's a wide world of muscle-building foods to try. This week is all about expanding your palate and trying ingredients that might be a bit outside your comfort zone.

GOAL: Decrease portion sizes of animal proteins

The beauty of a flexitarian lifestyle is that it's not all or nothing. So if you can't quite wrap your taste buds around, say, a bean-only taco, this week try using half the ground beef you'd normally use and round out the filling with black beans. Pine also suggests making stir-fries and casseroles primarily with vegetables, and using meat as the garnish. Here is a snapshot of vegetarian proteins to work into your meal planning.

VEGETARIAN PROTEINS



Beans

1 cup cooked black beans
15 grams protein



Dairy products

(cheese, milk, yogurt)
5.3-ounce container Greek yogurt
13 grams protein



Eggs

1 egg (large)



Grains

(try barley, farrow, quinoa)
1 cup cooked quinoa



Nuts & Seeds

2 Tbsp peanut butter (chunky)



Tofu

(available in a variety of textures)
1/2 cup
11 grams protein

WEEK 2

TRY FOR 5

This week we're challenging you to forgo meat for a handful of meals. By gradually pulling back the frequency with which you eat meat, says Pine, you'll give your taste buds time to adapt as you reach a level that feels comfortable to you.

GOAL: Eat 5 meatless meals

If you're thinking, *Yikes!*, relax, we've got you covered with a number of delicious, simple meal ideas.

BREAKFAST

Mindful Red Quinoa Pancakes
•
Mindful Pecan Crunch Wheat Berry French Toast
•
Oatmeal topped with nuts and fruit

LUNCH

Mindful Black Bean Lettuce Cups
•
Mindful Rellenos Quesadilla
•
Mindful Greens & Ancient Grains Salad
•
Roasted vegetable and mozzarella sandwich or wrap

DINNER

Mindful Penne Pasta & Freekeh Meatballs
•
Mindful Eggplant Parmesan Pizzetta
•
Mindful Monterey Black Bean Burger
•
Stir fry with tofu and mixed vegetables

WEEK 3

FIND YOUR FIT

There's no hard-and-fast "official" definition of a flexitarian—and that's a good thing. Now that you're familiar with vegetarian sources of protein that you can build entire meals around, it's time to work on strategies that will make all of this second nature to you.

GOAL: Make the flexitarian habit stick

These tips will help take the guesswork out of meal planning and prep work.

1 Experiment. You may like the idea of going entirely meatless every other day, or you may opt for being a nighttime vegetarian. Play around with different approaches until you land on something that fits best with your daily routine.

2 Stock up. In these early flexitarian days, get ahead of the game by stocking up on already-prepped vegetables and grains that are recipe ready. With the right ingredients at the ready, you're less likely to fall prey to old habits.

3 Focus on flavor. Chances are you've heard about umami. It's the naturally occurring savory taste that makes your favorite meat and fish dishes so crave-worthy. Fortunately, umami is also present in aged cheeses like Parmesan, mushrooms, tomatoes, walnuts and soy.

WEEK 4

STAY HOOKED

Congratulations. By now you've scaled back your meat consumption—and, if it could, your overall health would be high-fiving you right now!

GOAL: Keep things fresh

You'll likely need to remind yourself that you're not totally getting rid of meat. Pine likes to tell people to focus on what they're adding: "Remember, you're adding so many great flavors, just in other forms. Think like a foodie—this is a fun experiment with food," she says. Keep these tips in mind as you solidify your new eating habits.

- **Try a new vegetarian recipe or meal each week.** Two recipes to try: the Mindful Greek Black Bean Burger or the Mindful Asian Brown Rice Bowl with Corn, Cucumber and Squash.
- **Join a cooking class** or watch cooking videos online to pick up new meal ideas.
- **Have fun with new spices and cooking oils,** and try cooking tried-and-true foods in new ways (cauliflower steaks, anyone?).