

This diet swap can cut your carbon footprint and boost longevity

Warm-Up Questions:

Have you ever considered switching to a plant-based diet? What are your thoughts about reducing meat consumption?

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STEVE INSKEEP, HOST:

If you want to stay strong without eating so much meat, you're not alone. After our story on boosting protein for strength, we heard from a lot of listeners who are trying to eat more protein through a plant-based diet. A new study finds that cutting back on red meat a few times a week is linked to a longer lifespan and a decrease in greenhouse gases. NPR's Allison Aubrey reports.

ALLISON AUBREY, BYLINE: This new study really adds to the evidence that a plant-focused diet can be better for health and for the planet. It fits with what we heard from so many listeners and readers who tell us they're aiming to move in this direction. Kyle Backlund said he was used to eating meat at many meals. Then he stopped. At first, he said he felt like he was missing out on protein. He noticed his energy level was way off when he exercised.

KYLE BACKLUND: I would experience some **lethargy** and weakness, just a drain on my energy.

AUBREY: He decided to add more protein to his diet - so for starters, things like a quick energy bar before exercise. His partner, Stephany Marreel, who's also plant-focused, said she adds protein to soups and stews by blending in tofu, vegetables and grains like quinoa. She says it's easy to **tweak** recipes to **amp up** protein, like her zucchini fritters.

STEPHANY MARREEL: You add egg to it, and you can add almond flour instead of a regular white flour, which has, again, more - a little more protein in it. And you make it like a patty. And I air-fried them.

AUBREY: They come out crispy. And Kyle says he's now feeling good on the plant-based diet.

BACKLUND: Every meal that we have is unique and delicious. And so I'm fully **on board**, and it doesn't take a whole lot of **arm twisting**.

AUBREY: Dr. Christopher Gardner is a Stanford food scientist whose research is at the center of the Netflix documentary "You Are What You Eat: A Twin Experiment." He says people can get all the protein and nutrients they need from a plant-based diet with a little planning.

CHRISTOPHER GARDNER: Oh, yeah. If someone is consuming a reasonable variety of **legumes** - that's beans, chickpeas, lentils, nuts and seeds, vegetables - meeting protein needs, all from plant sources, to sustain muscle is no problem.

AUBREY: It's not just about eating a diet that's good for your health. Gardner says it's also about a diet that's good for the planet. There's a lot of evidence linking meat production to environmental impacts. **Livestock** require a lot of land and water. And an analysis from the World Resources Institute, home to the Cool Food project, shows producing beef leads to about 20 times the emissions compared to producing beans. That's per gram of protein.

And a new study from McGill University estimates if people swap about half of their red and processed meat intake for plant protein, their diet-related **carbon footprint** drops by about 25%. Here's study author Olivia Auclair.

OLIVIA AUCLAIR: What these findings show is that we don't really need to go to any major extremes, like adopting very restrictive diets or excluding certain food groups altogether.

AUBREY: Auclair's study was motivated by the recent Canada Food Guide, which recommends people consume plenty of plant proteins as part of a diet to optimize good health. Simple shifts, Auclair says - for example, eating red or processed meat two times a week instead of four - is linked to both a longevity boost and a significant decrease in carbon footprint.

Allison Aubrey, NPR News.

Vocabulary and Phrases:

1. **Lethargy:** A state of tiredness, lack of energy, or a lack of interest in doing things.
2. **Tweak:** To make small adjustments to something in order to improve it.
3. **Amp up:** To increase or intensify something.
4. **On board:** To agree with or support an idea or plan.
5. **Arm twisting:** Persuading someone to do something that they are reluctant to do, usually by using strong tactics.
6. **Legumes:** A family of plants that include beans, peas, lentils, and peanuts, known for being rich in protein and nutrients.
7. **Livestock:** Farm animals raised for consumption, such as cows, pigs, and chickens.
8. **Carbon footprint:** The total amount of greenhouse gases produced to directly and indirectly support human activities, usually expressed in equivalent tons of carbon dioxide (CO₂).

Comprehension Questions:

1. What are the health and environmental benefits mentioned in the study regarding reducing red meat consumption?
2. How did Kyle Backlund change his diet, and what effects did he notice?
3. What does Stephany Marreel add to her meals to increase protein content?
4. What does Dr. Christopher Gardner say about meeting protein needs on a plant-based diet?
5. According to the new study, how much can swapping meat for plant protein reduce an individual's diet-related carbon footprint?

Discussion Questions:

1. What foods do you usually eat in a typical day? Are there any plant-based foods you particularly enjoy?
2. Have you ever tried a plant-based diet? What was the experience like, and what did you learn from it?
3. How could traditional dishes from your country be adapted to be more plant-based?
4. What role should food companies play in promoting a plant-based diet?
5. Have you noticed any changes in society's attitudes towards consuming meat in recent years?