

HELP THE WORLD BY HELPING YOURSELF

BY HAROLD EYSTER

Climate change is the biggest global health threat of the 21st century. But you, as a consumer, have the power to mitigate this threat. Not only will you protect the health of the planet and the animals and people on it, you will also enhance your personal health in the process.

As we all know, climate change is caused by an increase in atmospheric levels of greenhouse gases. But the burning of fossil fuels isn't the only contributor to these high levels of greenhouse gases. In fact, livestock emit 18% of all greenhouse gases, more than the contribution from transportation. The carbon footprint of a quarter-pound hamburger is 99 times greater than the equivalent number of calories coming from vegetables. This is due to methane (23 times potent than carbon dioxide in causing climate change) and from the simple inefficiency of eating a primary consumer (a cow) instead of directly eating what the cow eats (plants). If everyone ate more plants and less meat, it would have a large effect on reducing climate change.

Each time that you choose to eat grains or vegetables instead of meat, not only will you help our environment, but you will also help yourself in a very direct way.

According to the World Health Organization, "Overweight and obesity are major risk factors for a number of chronic diseases, including diabetes, cardiovascular diseases and cancer."



With 37.5% of the US population obese, this is a major problem facing the US. But losing weight is difficult. Common knowledge holds that to lose weight you have to exercise a lot more, eat a lot less, and never eat desserts. Sound unpleasant? A clinical study published in the *American Journal of Medicine* suggests an easier option. An option which allows you to lose weight and help the planet simultaneously. The researchers selected 64 overweight women. Half received a vegan diet while the other half received a conventional diabetes treatment diet. Participants were told to continue in their typical amount of exercise for the duration of the study. The amount of food that the subjects could eat was not limited. At the end of the study period, weight-loss, waist-circumference reduction, and BMI reduction were all significantly greater for the subjects consuming the vegan diet. Another study found a significant relationship between a diet low in meat and rich in fruit and a low BMI and waist circumference, across all activity levels.

As the seventh leading cause of death in the US, diabetes is a serious health issue. Not only can a plant-based diet help to prevent diabetes by keeping people at their optimal weight, it can also help people already afflicted with the disorder. A study published in the *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* found that diabetes patients consuming low-fat vegan diets appeared to show a larger drop in glycemia and a greater decrease in low-density lipoproteins (LDLs) than patients consuming a conventional diabetes treatment diet. Glycemia is the level of glucose in the blood, and the primary objective of diabetes treatment is to lower glycemia to normal levels. LDLs facilitate transport of cholesterol and fat molecules within the bloodstream. LDLs also enable the transport of cholesterol into arterial walls where the cholesterol can cause a plaque to develop, which can cause stroke, heart attack, and other cardiovascular disorders.

But the benefits of plant-based diets don't end with weight loss and diabetes treatment and prevention. Plant-based diets have also been shown to improve cardiovascular health. And prevent certain types of cancer.

Next time you have to make the decision between eating a hamburger or something plant-based, go for the veggies, and help the planet by helping yourself.



Figure 1: A vegetarian diet can actually be beneficial to the environment and for human health. *Photo credit to Wikipedia.*

- *Eyster is a senior in Winthrop House and is concentrating in MCB*

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