

# Can Going Vegetarian Cure the U.S. of Diabetes?

**Around 30 percent of Americans have or are in the early stages of this disease, but we know how to stop it.**

By Julia Westbrook

The [Center for Disease Control and Prevention](#) says that 115 million people have diabetes or pre-diabetes. That's about 30 percent of the country. "That's a staggering statistic," says Neal Barnard, MD, researcher and author of [Dr. Neal Barnard's Program for Reversing Diabetes](#).

While important, cutting out sugar—a common health recommendation for diabetics—can be difficult, especially when there are tons of sneaky names for the sweet stuff and considering that sugar is addictive as cocaine. Fortunately, there's a surprising solution that's even more straightforward: Ditch the meat.

[Reviewing](#) all of the existing research on vegetarianism and diabetes, Dr. Barnard and his team found that giving up meat is an effective way to reclaim your health, whether you have or are at risk for diabetes. "A plant-based diet is about as powerful as taking an oral diabetes medication," he says.

"Medications are virtually always used for the treatment of diabetes and increasingly for the treatment of pre-diabetes," says Dr. Barnard. And these drugs aren't cheap. He points out that, in addition to the wellness cost of the medications' many side effects, the monetary costs for a patient's diabetes drugs can be \$5,000 a year.

In addition to reducing or getting you off diabetes drugs, going vegetarian can improve cardiovascular health, curtail high blood pressure, reduce body weight, and lower plasma lipids. "You can take one medicine for your blood sugar, another one for your blood pressure, another one for your cholesterol, and yet a plant-based diet seems to tackle all of those problems at the same time," he says.

He does put this into perspective a bit saying, "Not everyone will get off all their medicines. In some cases, it can do that, but in other cases, it can reduce the amount of medicines that a person needs. It's always to the good," he says.

## **How Going Vegetarian Makes You Healthier**

These benefits may stem from the nutritional advantages vegetarians enjoy over omnivores:

- *They eat about 140 fewer calories a day.* This alone can help enable weight loss, which is a proven strategy for reducing diabetes.
- *They eat 10 percent less fat.* This doesn't mean it's a "low-fat" diet (because that comes with its own set of issues), but simply getting off of the typical, high-fat American diet. Previous studies have found that blood lipid content is highly correlated with insulin resistance.
- *They eat 7 grams more fiber than omnivores.* Fiber can slow glucose absorption in the intestine, improve glycemic control by increasing bile acid excretion, and works with gut bacteria to regulate intestinal glucose processes.
- *They have a different amino acid profile,* since a major source of protein comes from soy instead of meat. Studies have shown that replacing meat with soy improves insulin sensitivity and lowers cholesterol.

Going vegetarian can offer millions of Americans freedom from health issues and drugs. "A simple diet change, if it's done in the right way, can help on multiple health variables, save money, and help people to live in a much more healthful way," says Dr. Barnard.

### **It's Not the Challenge You Think It Will Be**

According to Dr. Barnard, it's easier to give up meat than it is to give up smoking, so don't think that going vegetarian is an insurmountable task. He recommends a two-step system for easing yourself off meat.

"It's straightforward. It feels challenging in the beginning, but it's easier than people think," he says. To get started, Dr. Barnard offers a [21-day Vegan Kickstart](#) that can walk you through the process.

Even though you don't need to worry about getting enough protein, here are some resources:

[9 Super-Healthy, Vegetarian Protein Sources](#)

[The 17 Best Protein Sources for Vegans and Vegetarians](#)