

Plant Foods Promote Health

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The American College of Lifestyle Medicine (ACLM) is a professional association of physicians and medical professionals dedicated to the evidence-based practice of adopting lifestyle behaviors such as regular exercise, healthful food choices, eliminating tobacco use and moderate alcohol consumption as the first treatment option in preventing and managing chronic disease. The ACLM recently released a position statement on the role of nutrition and food choices on health:

"For the treatment, reversal and prevention of lifestyle-related chronic disease, the ACLM recommends an eating plan based predominantly on a variety of minimally processed vegetables, fruits, whole grains, legumes (beans), nuts and seeds."

The ACLM's statement supports its position that food is the primary intervention to treat, reverse and prevent lifestyle-related chronic diseases including cardiovascular disease, diabetes, osteoporosis and cancer.

In a press release announcing the position statement, ACLM President George Guthrie, MD, MPH, FACLM, said "Medicine is supposed to restore health and wholeness to those who are sick. For chronic lifestyle-related diseases the best treatment is intensive lifestyle change."

The ACLM statement is based on a large body of research that supports the important role of a whole-food, plant-based eating pattern built around vegetables, fruit, legumes, minimally-processed whole grains, and nuts and seeds. Foods from animals play a much more limited role in this eating plan.

Choosing a variety of different foods is a key strategy to consume all the nutrients your body needs for optimal health.

Use the rainbow of colors of fruits and vegetables to make sure you're covering all the bases:

- Red (like tomatoes, beets and pomegranates)
- Yellow/orange (like carrots, summer squash and grapefruit)
- Blue/purple (like eggplant, purple cabbage and purple grapes)
- Green (like kiwi, asparagus and broccoli)
- White/brown (like onions, bananas and turnips).

Each week include a different type of whole grain, legume, nut, or seed in your food choices. You might use quinoa instead of brown rice as a side dish, or lentils instead of black beans in a soup or chili, or toss almonds into your salad instead of walnuts.

Key point: choose minimally-processed foods

Processing removes some of the essential nutrients in foods, which makes choosing minimally-processed foods a key health strategy. For example, a baked potato is far less processed than potato chips and a fresh apple is less processed than sweetened applesauce.

- 100% whole grains are less processed than enriched or fortified grains. Choose cereal, bread, and crackers that include the word "whole" in the first ingredient and foods with the shortest ingredient list.
- Frozen and canned fruits and vegetables without added salt, sugar, or seasonings are minimally-processed. Instead of using boxed potato, rice, couscous, or quinoa mixes, start with the whole food and prepare it yourself.

Key point: fill your plate with foods from plants

Plant foods contain fiber, antioxidants, vitamins, and minerals that are essential to health. Plants are also good sources of unsaturated fatty acids that help promote a healthy cardiovascular system and they contain far less of less-healthy types of saturated fatty acids. We often don't realize that legumes, nuts and seeds, and whole grains contribute important amounts of protein to our diet. When we fill our plate with plant foods, we're giving our body key nutrients that promote lifelong health.

- Build your meals around vegetables, such as a vegetable salad with legumes, nuts and seeds or a vegetable stir-fry with a small amount of animal protein.
- Use animal proteins such as chicken, beef, seafood or pork as a side dish, not the main component of a meal.

It's never too late to start making changes to include more minimally-processed plant foods in your daily food choices.

Sources: For Good Health, Choose a Plant-Based Eating Pattern, *By Lynn Grieger, RDN, CDE, CPT, CHWC*, <https://foodandhealth.com> <https://www.lifestylemedicine.org/Presidents-Desk> August 2018.

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