Where’s the Beef?

Research shows major benefits to occasionally swapping the meat in your meals for plant-based protein. Here’s how to think vegan, be it only for one dinner, one day or the rest of your life.

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If you don’t know where to begin planning a meal without meat, Sharon Palmer, a registered dietitian and the author of The Plant-Powered Diet, suggests starting with “Meatless Mondays.”

Originally a wartime campaign to regulate American food consumption during World War I and II, Meatless Mondays was reintroduced in 2003 by marketing maven Sid Lerner and the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health as a movement to increase public health awareness. Today, millions of people and thousands of schools and restaurants across the globe have eased into no-meat mode when planning their weekly meals.

“It’s also easy to eat meatless during the day and occasionally have a meat meal for dinner,” Palmer says. “Or try eliminating red meat from your diet, which is the kind of meat linked with the most health risk and environmental damage.”

But whether it’s Meatless Mondays, Steak-free Saturdays or barbecues sans beef, choosing to remove—or at least cut back on—the animal flesh from your plates can do wonders for your health, your pocketbook and planet Earth.

The case for a meat-free diet is backed by research that shows eating less meat may improve people’s health. In a recent study that was published by the Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA), researchers followed the dietary habits of 73,000 men and women, older than 25, during a six-year period. All study participants were Seventh-day Adventists from Canada and the United States who practiced varying types of vegetarianism; they ranged from strict vegans (who eat no animal products whatsoever) to pesco-vegetarians (who also eat seafood).

The study’s findings showed vegetarians experienced 12 percent fewer deaths than non-vegetarians. Another study, conducted by Oxford Univer-sity, found that vegetarians were 32 percent less likely to be hospitalized or die because of heart disease compared with those who ate meat and fish. “People who eat vegetarian or vegan diets live longer, weigh less and have lower rates of heart disease, diabetes and cancer,” Palmer says.

In addition, besides reaping nutritional benefits, people who consume more plant proteins are, generally,

happier—no joke. New research from the Harvard School of Public Health states that people who are more optimistic have higher levels of carotenoids in their blood. (Caroten-oids are powerful antioxidant pigments found in red, yellow and orange fruits and vegetables and in dark green leafy vegetables.) And although it's not proven that carotenoids are directly linked to happiness, these antioxidants are effective weapons that battle free radicals—molecules that can damage cells and contribute to disease—in our bodies.

Another big advantage of going meatless is savings. When you plan a big meal—lasagna for dinner with the grandparents, shish kebabs for your backyard barbecue, or tuna steaks for when the girls come over and you can finally open that bottle of white—all the grocery shopping might be very exciting—until you hit the checkout line. How did everything get so expensive? Check your shopping cart. It's probably loaded with meat—one of the priciest grocery items. Think about it. Meat is an ultra perishable food, and the cost of preparing, packaging and shipping this animal protein can be especially prohibitive.

In an infographic created by Learn Vest (a personal finance site) that compares the average cost of breakfast, lunch and dinner for a meat-eater, pescatarian, vegetarian and a vegan, the chart showed that on average meat-eaters spend two dollars more each day compared with vegetarians and vegans. Why? Because the most inexpensive foods are often plant-derived products. The calculations were hypothetical, but Learn Vest used grocery store prices. The total cost of one day's meals for each group said it all: Eat less meat, and you will spend less money.

Next time you're at the supermarket, do the math: organic chicken breast at $9.99 per pound or an 8-ounce box of quinoa for $3.29? Two 10-ounce, wild-caught salmon steaks for $8.59 or a few hunky portobello mushrooms for $6.99? You'll also pay more for higher quality meats and for more assurances that they come from natural sources (organic certification and inspection practices). It's no wonder the price of meat can soar. Often, this isn't the case with produce such as fruits, vegetables and grains. The reason? These foods can be bought in-season or from a farmer's market where consumer dollars return to the local economy.

And what about those benefits for the planet? According to the United Nations Food and Agricultural Organization, the nation's livestock sector produces more carbon dioxide emissions than the entire transportation sector. Whether it's farm to table or ocean to grill, the production and distribution of beef, poultry, fish and dairy cost more in money, time and resources.

To process one gram of animal protein requires 100 times the amount of water needed to produce one gram of grain protein. In addition, one calorie of animal protein requires 11 times the amount of fossil fuels needed to produce one calorie of plant protein. And raising livestock causes 55 percent of soil erosion in the United States. These telling facts are neatly compiled by Door to Door Organics (an online grocer designed to help consumers shop smart, shop green and shop local). Simply explained, these factoids show that the more meat we eat, the more we deplete our supply of natural resources.

But the good news is, if each household went meatless on Mondays, or on any day of the week, we could significantly reduce our carbon footprint. Just check out this equation: For each year that a household gives up meat for just one meal each week, this is equivalent to driving 1,160 fewer miles each year. Imagine what the mileage savings would be if we ate three meatless meals.

Are you ready to take the plunge? Palmer says you can combine vegetables with grains as a great source of protein and other nutrients. "For example, you can create a stir-fry with tofu, vegetables and peanuts

and serve it over a whole grain, such as brown rice or quinoa," she suggests. "This is a great source of protein that's comparable to meat."

Indeed, skipping the steak doesn't mean it's OK to miss out on protein—it's an essential component of a healthy diet. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) recommends that 10 to 15 percent of your daily calories come from protein. That means, for a 2,000-calorie-a-day diet, you need about 50 grams of protein—but this varies depending on a person's age, gender, health and dietary needs.

Most definitely, going meatless to get healthy is not limited to just cutting back on red and white meats. Meatless diets include finding the right protein substitutes—lentils, greens, nuts, seeds, fruits and whole grains—to boost your intake of healthy nutrients such as fiber, vitamins and phytochemicals and to reduce saturated fat in the diet.

Another wonderful meatless source of protein is seitan. Essen-tially, this meat substitute is wheat gluten washed free of its starches. Many people swear that seitan looks and tastes like the real thing. In addition, the mock chicken, beef or pork is popular among many vegetarians and easy to incorporate into meatless dishes.

According to Palmer, there was a time when people didn't make meat the central focus of their meals. In those days, cooks used meats as if they were precious condiments to spice up dishes and add flair to the foods they served. As a way to slowly shift to more plant-based meals, Palmer suggests people revisit this tradition. Instead of the big hunk of meat and hefty blob of mashed potatoes, white rice or noodles that currently overcrowd American dinner plates—maybe with just enough room for a small side of cooked veggies—Palmer would prefer to see something different on the platter.

The new American dinner plate, she says, should have nothing at its center; instead, it should be three-fourths full of whole grains and cooked or fresh veggies and fruit, while the other one-fourth should be a healthy serving of a protein-rich plant food.

With all of that, who needs meat?

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