Protein Substitutes

Are whole-food options that double for meat healthier?

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When folks become vegetarians, many still longingly recall tasty meat dishes they forswore. But some veggies can mimic the texture and mouthfeel of meat so well that even die-hard carnivores are fooled.

Some plant-based foods used as alternatives to meat include portobello and cremini mushrooms, eggplant, lentils, beans of all kinds, potatoes and nuts. Cooks can whip these satiating, wholesome foods into burgers, meat loaf, stews and creative stir-fries that banish hunger.

But beware processed, packaged replacements, such as texturized vegetable protein (TVP), which is super versatile as a stand-in for meat. Many ready-to-eat dishes made from TVP are high in salt, monosodium glutamate and other additives and have questionable health benefits.

Seitan, a popular low-calorie meat substitute that's high in protein, is made from wheat gluten—not a good thing for those with celiac disease or gluten intolerance—and the prepared, packaged variety can be high in sodium.

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