



Flex your plan for healthier eating

February 28, 2009

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DIET: *The Flexitarian Diet: The Mostly Vegetarian Way to Lose Weight, Be Healthier, Prevent Disease, and Add Years to Your Life* (McGraw Hill; \$26.95)

CREATOR: Dawn Jackson Blatner

CREDENTIALS: Registered dietitian and national spokesperson for the American Dietetic Association.



MICHAEL STUPARYK/ TORONTO STAR

Brown rice works for breakfast.

CELEBRITY EDGE: None for the book – yet. But Jackson Blatner is Lifetime Television's nutrition expert, a nutrition blogger for *USA Today* and does countless other media spots.

CLAIM: Flexitarianism – a flexible, mostly vegetarian diet – can help manage weight, boost energy and lower health risks, claims Jackson Blatner. The new food movement is also – duh – about being flexible, which means there are no rules and restrictions. The only hard and fast tenet is to eat more plants at every meal.

PROGRAM: Follow the Flex Five, which include: 1. make meals around five flexible food groups – vegetable proteins, including beans, peas, nuts and seeds, plus fruit, grains, dairy, sugar and spices; 2. a five-week flexible meal plan; 3. recipes made with five main ingredients; 4. five fitness factors; and 5. five ways to troubleshoot poor eating habits.

SIDE NOTES: Craving the flavour of meat, maybe a spicy sausage or a juicy burger? Reach instead for a sautéed mushrooms, a bit of aged parmesan cheese or even a cup of hot green tea. Jackson Blatner claims people yearn for foods with an umami taste, the fifth taste often found in meats and fish. To curb a meat craving, she says, look instead to

Day before: It's almost official – veggies are the new "it" diet. Books are coming out fast and furious espousing the benefits of plants. Eating more veggies was my New Year's resolution; plants are filling, packed with nutrients and yet – at least in my house – are often left to rot at the back of the refrigerator. Not anymore! That doesn't mean meat is out, just that plants are at the top of my best-dressed list.

vegetarian umami foods that deliver the same great taste sensation without the fats that (often) come with meat.

ALLOWED: Well, anything, really, since the whole idea is to be flexible. But you should stick to the five flex groups as much as possible.

PROHIBITED: Nada!

EXPERT OPINION: "This is not a typical diet book that tells you to eat this and avoid that," says Susan Finkelstein, a Toronto-based registered dietitian. "In this plan, everything can fit – even meat."

In fact, this plan is more than a diet book, it's a solid reference for people who are looking to add more healthy meals into their diet, she says. The plan contains practical advice on how to buy, store and cook new ingredients, from grains to lentils to spices, and it answers the most common questions about healthy eating.

"It gives you interesting ideas on how to make healthy eating more palatable," says Finkelstein. People can pair favourite foods, spices or even sugar, with their least favourite fruits and vegetables to make them more palatable and help expand their taste buds.

Although the diet emphasizes vegetarian meals, Finkelstein says meals made with meat are okay, too. Nothing here is forbidden.

"It's important to include a variety of foods in your diet," she says. "If your current plan contains meat all the time, add more vegetarian meals to mix it up. You'll get more nutrients that way."

Although weight loss is not the main focus of the book, Finkelstein says it would likely be a side effect of following this diet. Eating more vegetarian foods is associated with other health benefits. Eating more beans and vegetables will up your fibre intake, which could help with bowel regularity. The veggie-styled meals could also help control cholesterol levels, increase satiety after meals and even lower cancer risk.

EXPERT VERDICT: "It's an excellent resource book for people interested in including more vegetarian foods in their diet. It's the kind of book you keep referring to."

OUR VERDICT: This plan is simple and swappable, could accommodate most lifestyles and – the best bit – the food is tasty and fun to make.

Love that this plan is about being flexible. With busy schedules, tight budgets and emotional stresses, eating healthy definitely has to be easy and fun.

Day of: Meal plan a whiz to put together. Just have to pick the bfast, lunch and dinner I feel most like eating today and – bingo! – almost all ingredients already in my pantry. Helps that each meal has only a few easily swappable ingredients. Perfect for mid-week rush!

Reheat leftover brown rice for breakfast and find it surprisingly satisfying. A warm comfort on a dark, wintry morning. Lunch is equally tasty and easy to make. It's crunchy, filling and takes less than five minutes to zap in microwave. Love it!

Can't stop with the exclamation points! Dinner and snacks also get four stars. This may not be gourmet dining but it's quick, yummy and fantastically do-able. And, I can dig into a (properly portioned) Sunday roast without guilt.

Breakfast:

Apricot-Almond Brown Rice

Breakfast (300 calories)

3/4 cup cooked brown rice

3 dried apricots, chopped

2 tbsp sliced almonds

1 tsp maple syrup

Top warm brown rice with apricots, almonds and maple syrup

Lunch:

Micro-Bean Burrito (419 calories)

3/4 cup canned low-fat or vegetarian refried beans

2 small (6-inch) whole-grain tortillas

1 slice cheddar cheese, cut in half

1/4 cup salsa

3/4 cup romaine lettuce

Heat beans. Spread on tortillas and top with other ingredients

Dinner:

Olive, Fennel and Goat Cheese Flatbread

1-1/2 cups low-sodium tomato soup (480 calories for both)

Snacks:

Honey Cinnamon
Grapefruit (149
calories)

Maple Yogurt (153
calories)

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