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Plant-based diet better for many reasons

McClatchy-Tribune

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Give your health a boost by eating meat a little less often. A flexitarian diet, loaded with fruits, vegetables and whole grains, gives you the best of both worlds: You get your meat fix and the healthy perks of a vegetarian diet.

The 5 big reasons to do it:

1 YOU'LL SAVE MONEY Vegetarian protein sources like beans, low-fat dairy and eggs cost a fraction of the price of meat.

2 IT'S NATURALLY SLIMMING "People whose diets are plant-based weigh 15 percent less than meat eaters," says Dawn Jackson Blatner, an American Dietetic Association spokeswoman and author of "The Flexitarian Diet" (McGraw-Hill, 2009). "For the average woman, that's about 25 pounds less."

3 IT HELPS YOUR HEART A flexitarian diet lowers your risk of hypertension because you're eating lots of the blood pressure-lowering mineral potassium, found mainly in produce. Low in saturated fat and high in soluble fiber (which soaks up cholesterol and shuttles it out of your body), this type of diet also cuts cholesterol.

4 IT PROTECTS AGAINST CANCER People who eat a plant-based diet and exercise regularly slash their risk of cancer by 30 percent to 40 percent, according to the American Institute for Cancer Research.

5 IT'S KINDER TO THE PLANET Animal protein requires 11 times more energy to produce than grains do. What's more, raising meat uses 26 times more water than growing vegetable protein.

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