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Flexitarians can have their meat and not eat it, too

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By Nanci Hellmich, USA TODAY

Dawn Jackson Blatner, a registered dietitian in Chicago who has worked with thousands of overweight patients, has her own diet confession.

She has been a vegetarian for more than 10 years, but sometimes she cheats and eats meat, even juicy steaks. She calls herself "a closet meat-eater" and tries not to get caught with a burger or pork chop on her plate. For a long time, she felt as if she were a lazy vegetarian, so she created her own style of eating. She explains it in her new book, *The Flexitarian Diet*.

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It's for people who want to be vegetarians most of the time but "don't want to sit at a barbecue in their neighborhood with an empty bun," says Blatner, a nutrition blogger for [dietchallenge.usatoday.com](#) and a spokeswoman for the American Dietetic Association.

Q: What is a flexitarian diet?

A: I wrote this book to describe a way of eating that is mostly vegetarian but does not cut out meat completely. It's to show people how to be a casual vegetarian.

Q: What's the diet plan?

A: I've developed three levels. You can be a beginner, advanced or expert flexitarian. For example, a beginner would have two meatless days a week, eating a total of 26 ounces of meat or poultry over the other five days. An advanced flexitarian has three to four meatless days a week, consuming a total of about 18 ounces of meat or poultry. An expert flexitarian has about five meatless days a week and eats only 9 ounces of meat or poultry a week. This plan is not just about eating less meat. The most important part is eating more healthful vegetarian foods, such as beans, nuts, whole grains and produce.

Q: What's the calorie range?

A: For most people this is a 1,500-calorie plan, which is a good amount for losing weight without getting too hungry. A typical day has three meals and two snacks. Each breakfast contains about 300 calories, each lunch about 400 calories and each dinner is about 500. I recommend two snacks a day of 150 calories each. You can adjust the plan very easily. You can decrease the calories to 1,200 a day by skipping the snacks. You can increase by doubling the breakfast.

Q: How is eating this way healthful?

A: True vegetarians who are eating mostly vegetables, fruit, beans, nuts and whole grains usually weigh about 15% less than their meat-eating counterparts. They tend to have a lower rate of heart disease, diabetes and cancer and live longer. But this applies to true vegetarians and not people who just give up meat and opt for junk food like cookies and chips.

Q: How does a dieter get enough protein on the plan?

A: The diet focuses on plant-based proteins such as beans, nuts and seeds. We need to have about 50 grams of protein each day, which you will easily get from eating the three meals and two snacks.

Q: Do you have to cook a lot or be a good cook to eat this way?

A: About 60% of the book is recipes. I teach cooking classes, and my students have taught me that the only healthy recipes they like are those that taste great and can be made in a hurry. All the recipes only have five main ingredients and can be prepared by people who aren't good cooks. Many recipes also have what I call flex swaps, which are suggestions for ingredient exchanges, such as how to use fish, chicken or beef in a vegetarian recipe.

Q: Do you need any special cooking techniques or ingredients to cook this way?

A: You will mostly find common ingredients. However, this book will expose you to some new foods, such as flaxseed oil, agave nectar, quinoa, leafy greens and sunflower-seed butter. I explain why all the ingredients are good for you, and how to use them in delicious recipes.

Q: Is it expensive to eat this way, especially including a lot of fruits and vegetables?

A: No, meat is one of the most expensive items on a grocery bill, so swapping meat for veggie proteins such as beans and tofu can save you big money.

READERS: Are you a "flexitarian" or do you know one? What do you see as the benefits and pitfalls?

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