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Are You Flexible?

A plant-heavy diet plus a little meat is good for your health, the planet and your pocket.

As any fitness professional can attest, flexibility brings myriad benefits. Less injury, improved performance and increased strength can be chalked up to the ability to touch your toes. However, another type of flexibility is gaining popularity—not in the gym but in the kitchen.

Many—perhaps a number of your clients—have been tempted to become vegetarians, but the thought of giving up barbecues or mom's famous meatloaf seems too daunting. Thankfully, you can obtain many of the same benefits of vegetarian living without forgoing chicken breasts completely. You just have to become a "flexitarian."

Flexitarians eat mostly plant-based foods but dabble in steak, chicken stir-fry or fish tacos. Their loose adherence to a meat-free diet is motivated by animal rights, concerns over the earth's ecology and a raft of research suggesting impressive health perks from swapping beef for beans more often.

"Think of it as a pro-plant, not anti-meat dietary lifestyle," says Dawn Jackson Blatner, RD, LDN, a Chicago-based dietitian and author of *The Flexitarian Diet* (McGraw-Hill 2008). Blatner calls herself a "social carnivore": she prepares only veggie burgers and plant-based foods at home but eats meat when dining out or attending social events.

While about 3% of Americans are traditional vegetarians (Stahler 2006), it's unclear how many consider themselves flexitarians. However, nutritionists like Blatner believe the numbers are on the upswing, judging from the burgeoning veggie options in supermarkets. Blatner credits much of the growth of flexitarianism to the nation's increasing understanding of the diet-disease connection.

More and more, chefs and food writers are preaching the eat-less-meat mantra. Food guru Mark Bittman, author of *Food Matters* (Simon & Schuster 2008), advises shunning meat before dinner (Parker-Pope 2009). Acclaimed chef and cookbook author Mario Batali advocates at least one meatless meal a week (Meatless Monday.com 2011). Since his teenage years, New York City chef and culinary instructor Peter Berley, now 58 and author of *The Flexitarian Table* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt 2007), has noshed primarily on plant-based foods with room for small amounts of fowl, meat and fish. "I've never been comfortable with strict eating regimens, so I appreciate the flexibility flexitarianism offers." He adds: "Done right, plant-based eating can greatly improve the aesthetics and satisfaction of mealtime." And perhaps the real signifier that flexitarians are here to stay: they have their own Facebook groups.

Here's why it might be time to embrace flexitarianism:

It's, Well, Flexible

What exactly does being a flexitarian entail? Does it mean eating animal protein

"Flexitarian eating is ideal for those who want to prepare and eat more vegetarian meals but find it too arduous to commit [to going meatless] 100% of the time."

***—Dawn Jackson Blanter, RD, LDN, Author of* The Flexitarian Diet**

once a week? Once a month? Once a day? Do veg-only days also mean shunning dairy and eggs? "As the name suggests, the beauty of flexitarianism is that it's all about options," says Blatner.

You can embrace meatless Mondays, making 1 day a week meat-free. Or you can start by simply cutting the quantity of meat in certain meals; for example, replacing half the beef in burgers and tacos with mushrooms.

"Flexitarian eating is ideal for those who want to prepare and eat more vegetarian meals but find it too arduous to commit [to going meatless] 100% of the time," Blatner says. "Unlike so many other regimented dietary plans that make certain food off-limits, flexitarian eating is easy to stick to because the food options are wide open, as there are no forbidden edibles." You just have to work toward switching from a meat-heavy diet to a plant-based one. Blatner sees three categories of flexitarians:

- Beginner: eats two meatless meals a week.
- Advanced: eats three to four meatless meals a week.
- Expert: eats five or more plant-only meals a week.

As you get used to eating less meat, flexitarian advocates say, the cravings for daily meat should subside. Still, with this eating plan you needn't beat yourself up for giving in to the occasional steak craving or Big Mac attack.

It's also convenient when dining out. No more sticking to lackluster veggie menus or ordering salade niçoise sans anchovies. And as demand for vegetarian options increases, more restaurants will offer a better range of meatless menu choices.

It Reduces the Size of Your Carbon Footprint

Recent hoopla over eating locally sourced food has many people believing that the

our diet-related carbon footprint. But a recent study found that a shift toward eating less meat has a much greater impact. Scientists reported in the journal *Environmental Science and Technology* that replacing red meat and/or dairy with other protein sources such as eggs or vegetable-based dishes a single day per week could have the same climate impact as buying all household food from local providers (Weber & Matthews 2008).

A United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization report addresses why embracing tofu more often can do so much good (UNFAO 2006). Experts determined that raising cattle for burgers is generating more climate-warming greenhouse gases, including massive amounts of methane, than often-vilified transportation. Care and feeding of livestock consume 30% of the earth's land surface, which drives up deforestation for pasture, leading to further impacts on climate change.

As a nation, we consume about 200 pounds of beef, poultry and fish per person per year, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA 2002). The Environmental Working Group says each American skipping meat and cheese 1 day a week for a year would be tantamount to pulling 7.6 million cars off the road (EWG 2011). "It's clear that we cannot sustain our current meat consumption habits," Berley says.

It Boosts Your Bank Account

"Meat, fish and poultry tend to be among the most expensive items in the grocery cart," Blatner says, "so buying more plant-based items like lentils can save a family a significant amount of money, especially given the increasing food prices." Flexitarian eating also encourages more reasonable portions of meat, which likewise cuts grocery bills. "Another benefit of purchasing less meat is that when you do so, you can now afford to splurge on better-quality products, such as grass-fed beef and wild-caught Pacific salmon," Blatner says. "Meat consumption becomes about quality, not quantity."

It Can Trim Your Waistline

Midriffs everywhere may benefit from meatless Mondays.

Researchers at Boston's Tufts University compared food-frequency ques-

Protein Power

Taking meat out of the equation does not mean the body must be deprived of protein, which is required for muscle growth and recovery. "With smart food choices, it's very much possible to meet your protein needs without relying on beef, poultry or fish every day," says Jim White, RD. Incorporating these meatless protein heavyweights into a "meat-light" day makes reaching your quota a cinch.

hemp seeds	¼ cup = 11 grams (g) protein
quinoa	1 cup cooked = 8 g protein
edamame	1 cup = 17 g protein
tofu	3 ounces = 9 g protein
lentils	1 cup = 18 g protein
kidney beans	1 cup = 13 g protein
low-fat, plain Greek yogurt	6 ounces = 18 g protein
eggs	2 large = 12 g protein

tionnaires from more than 55,000 healthy women, finding that semivegetarians—who consume just small amounts of animal products—were 11% less likely to be overweight or obese than regular omnivores (Newby, Tucker & Wolk 2005). Similarly, a *Journal of the American Dietetic Association* study showed that subjects who ate or drank more calories from animal proteins were at greater risk of being overweight or obese than those who consumed less animal protein (Murtaugh et al. 2007). And a 2011 study in *The New England Journal of Medicine* involving more than 120,000 men and women determined that 4-year weight gain was inversely associated with the intake of fruit, nuts, vegetables and whole grains, while a high intake of red meat, processed meats and sugar-sweetened beverages was a risk factor for Buddha belly (Mozaffarian et al. 2011).

Tykes can benefit, too. A 2011 Loma Linda University study found that children and adolescents, aged 6–19, who more frequently ate grains, nuts and vegetables were less likely to be overweight than their counterparts who consumed more animal-derived foods such as full-fat dairy and meat (Matthews, Wien & Sabaté 2011).

"Plant-based meals are typically lower in calories, higher in fiber—to promote satiety—and with a lower proportion of calories from fat," says Jim White, RD, spokesman for the American Dietetic Association and owner of Jim White Fitness & Nutrition Studios in Virginia Beach, Virginia. He notes that you can expect to shed weight and body fat on a flexitarian diet only if you focus on eating reasonable portions of whole foods, such as beans and whole grains, as opposed to replacing animal protein with baked goods, bagels and large bowls of refined pasta.

It Offers a Better Nutrient Balance

Plant-based foods are rich in fiber, disease-thwarting antioxidants and a number of vitamins (such as vitamin C) that you won't find in meats. So it is no surprise that an *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* study found that semivegetarians live on average 3.6 years longer than meat-adoring nonvegetarians, likely owing to lower rates of chronic diseases that have a diet connection—such as diabetes, heart disease and cancer (Singh, Sabaté & Fraser 2003).

Yet, by including reasonable amounts of animal-based foods in your diet, White says, you don't have to worry as much about getting enough protein, calcium, vitamin D, iron and vitamin B_{12}, which can be lacking in stringent vegetarian and vegan diets. If your flexitarian diet includes very little meat or other animal-based foods, you would be wise to consult with a dietitian who is versed in vegetarian eating and can make sure you are covering all your macronutrient and micronutrient bases.

It Expands Your Horizons

Avoiding meat at every meal forces you to be creative with meal planning, says chef Peter Berley. Flexitarian eating—with its increased use of lentils, beans, grains such as quinoa and soy-based proteins like tempeh and tofu—is a great way to help people break out of their chicken-breast food rut and broaden their culinary horizons, he

The "Flex" Meal Plan

As these meals show, it's easy to flex your diet.

• **meaty meal:** whole-grain pasta with tomato meat sauce	• **meat-free meal:** whole-grain pasta with tomato black-bean sauce
• **meaty meal:** tuna salad sandwich	• **meat-free meal:** egg salad sandwich
• **meaty meal:** chicken and vegetable stir-fry	• **meat-free meal:** tofu and vegetable stir-fry
• **meaty meal:** grilled beef burger	• **meat-free meal:** grilled lentil burger
• **meaty meal:** turkey sandwich wraps	• **meat-free meal:** hummus sandwich wraps

Varieties of Vegetarians

Pescatarian: Avoids all meat and animal flesh, except fish.
Flexitarian: Focuses on plant-based foods, but allows varying amounts of meat.
Lacto-ovo-vegetarian: Eats no eat red meat, poultry or seafood, but does eat eggs and dairy products. Lacto-vegetarians don't eat eggs but do allow dairy.
Vegan: Eats no meat and avoids eggs, dairy products or processed foods containing these or other animal-derived ingredients, such as gelatin.
Raw: Eats a vegan diet of plant-only foods that have not been heated above 115 degrees Fahrenheit.

says. Visual potlucks such as foodgawker.com and tastespotting.com, as well as flexitarian-focused cookbooks like *The Flexitarian Table* and *Everyday Flexitarian* (Whitecap 2011), can inspire you to do wonders with tofu and mung beans. ■

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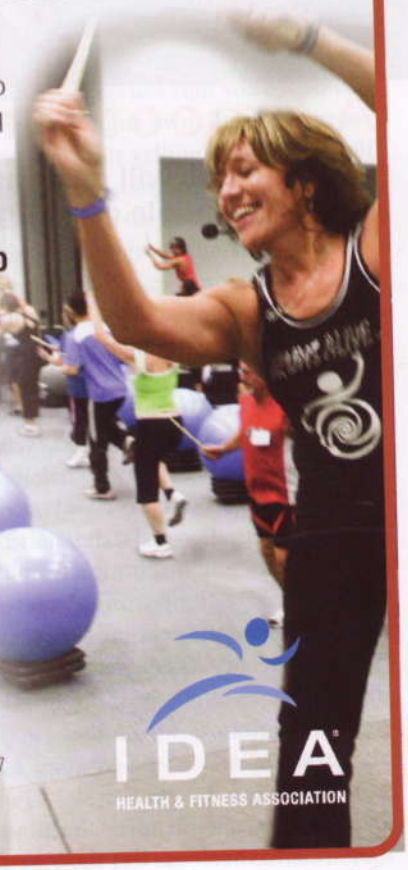

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