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# IMPROVE YOUR HEALTH — & — SAVE THE PLANET

BY KATHRYN POLLARD, MS.

This list of effective actions empowers each of us to lessen our impact on the environment and allow our bodies to find their highest level of health and optimal weight at the same time.

## 10. Don't Sweat the Small Stuff.

It is your daily diet that counts toward sustainable health and weight loss. If you are eating mostly whole plant foods at every meal, day-in-and-day-out, you are good. Enjoying a cupcake at the occasional birthday party is not going to ruin you, make you sick, or deposit another pound on your hips, if it's a rare event. Exceptions don't matter in the long-run, but if you string together a bunch of exceptions in a day, week or month to become a pattern of eating, then Houston, we have a problem.

In terms of environmental damage, a lifetime of eating meat contributes more greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions than just about anything



else you do, including all your transportation combined.<sup>1,2</sup> And growing animal food also demands more land and water than anything else you'd eat, making a meat-centered diet the most inefficient way to feed yourself. So, consider the big picture when it comes to diet, not the little transgressions. A diet based on vegetables, fruits, whole grains and beans (legumes) allows for the highest state of health for you and your planet.

## 9. Think WHOLE, Not PARTS.

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Our society is obsessed with food parts—stuff to avoid, embrace, study or supplement, like fat, salt, protein, cholesterol, or vitamin C. A more efficient and easier way to look at food is from a broader view. Consider instead if any particular food item is a whole food, or a bunch of food parts put together into something that resembles food, like a muffin, or a chip. Whole foods are apples, potatoes, carrots, black beans or peas, for example. Processed foods are apple juice, potato chips, bran muffins, donuts, or pizza. They combine a bunch of isolated food parts, such as oil, sugar, (or any sweetener), and flour. These concocted foods do not support health. Whole plant foods do. Animal foods are **in another category altogether and also** generally don't support health, but they do add saturated fat, cholesterol, animal protein, and dangerous metabolites to your system.

Keep that in mind when choosing foods for health. Also consider that the more processed a food, the more energy it takes to produce: e.g., manufacturing olive oil demands more energy than olives. Oil is just one fractured

food part found in processed, refined foods. And meat just may be the ultimate processed food, being made by processing plant-food through the complex machinery of a living animal.

## 8. Drink Water.

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Sugary drinks are the number one source of calories in teens' diets in the United States, according to the National Cancer Institute. Almost two-thirds of children in the U. S. consume at least one sugary beverage a day.<sup>2</sup> Soft drinks offer empty calories with no nutrients and burn unnecessary fossil fuel to



produce, on top of the energy demands to produce the cans! If you consider that a calorie is defined as a unit of measurement of potential energy, it would take 600 calories of energy to produce a can of soda, according to research done by Dr. David Pimentel of Cornell University. These are completely wasted calories delivering no nutritional value at all.<sup>3</sup> Replace those drinks with pure water as your preferred beverage; sparkly mineral water is great too.

## 7. Ditch the Dogs.

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Consumption of processed meat products including hot dogs and bologna has a high correlation to colorectal cancer, estimated to kill 50,000 Americans annually, as well as heart disease and Type 2 Diabetes. As defined by the

American Institute for Cancer Research processed meat is “meat preserved by smoking, curing, or salting, or with the addition of chemical preservatives.” Ham, pastrami, sausages, bacon, hot dogs, and luncheon meats are considered processed meat products, and all raise your risk of colorectal cancer. Additives, particularly nitrates and nitrites, produce carcinogenic compounds.

Further carcinogens are formed when meat is cooked at high temperatures (think grilling), producing heterocyclic amines. The amount of processed meat that is safe to consume is zero, so take charge of your health and remove them from your diet, and more importantly, your kid’s diet. Hot dogs are made from leftover meat trimmings, fat, and additives. Carnitine, an abundant amino acid in red meat, is converted by gut bacteria into TMAO, a compound shown to increase the risk of heart disease.<sup>4,5</sup>

Producing red meat consistently dwarfs all other foods when it comes to environmental impact on water, land, and biodiversity resources, and significantly contributes to climate change. Ditching it may be the

most powerful action you can take to curb your carbon footprint.

## 6. Eat Root Vegetables Every Day.

Roots and tubers are the storehouses of energy and nutrients for a growing plant; we eat the roots and we get the nutrients! These underground dynamos contain loads of fiber along with water and nutrients making these starches filling, powerhouse plant foods. Underground roots are easy to grow and demand comparatively little energy for the output of food produced, putting root veggies up there as one of the most highly efficient foods for sustainability. They are a local staple everywhere and are imported usually from closer regions; thus less energy from transportation is used.

## 5. Eliminate Eggs.

Eggs are the most concentrated source of dietary cholesterol with a whopping 200 mg. each, which by itself is the sum-total recommended limit (RDA) for one day. One egg has roughly 8.1 grams of saturated fat—about half of the recommended daily limit and is 70-80% fat.

Interestingly, animal proteins like in egg whites appear to stimulate cholesterol production in our own bodies. Eggs have the highest amount of methionine, the most acidic amino acid we take in, as well as high levels of sulfuric acid, commonly leading to colon problems.<sup>6,7</sup>

The typical lives of laying hens are not pleasant; they generally live in cramped cages, sharing feces and bacteria such as salmonella with their cage mates, which sickens an estimated 142,000 people every year, just from eggs.<sup>8</sup> In terms of GHG gas emissions and global warming potential, eggs rate lower than just about all animal foods, but higher than all plant foods, according to studies.<sup>8-11</sup> That says a lot for using plants to power ourselves!

## 4. Eliminate Oils.

There is little that’s healthy about extracted oils, (any oils!), except some trace vitamins, easily found elsewhere. Consider that oil is 100% fat and contributes to easy weight gain and inflammation. Oil begins to oxidize and go rancid as soon as it is liberated from plants. Oil in the blood imme-



**"...SPROUTING SEEDS ON YOUR KITCHEN COUNTER PRODUCES NO GHG EMISSIONS AT ALL, SUPPLYING THE END-PRODUCT OF WILD, EDIBLE PLANTS, WHICH ARE THE HEALTHIEST FOODS ON THE PLANET!..."**

diately suffocates the fragile endothelial cells of the arteries and vessels and keeps them from moving freely. This slows blood flow as the oil sludges through. In the meantime, the oil can lodge in vessels and add to plaque.

No oil is a whole food. Any kind, even the most virgin of olive oils, is an isolated, concentrated, extracted plant part that has no fiber to mitigate how fast it gets into the blood. It is associated with cardiovascular disease and aging, and creates toxins in the body as it oxidizes that can be damaging to cells.

Environmentally, oil is one of the most processed foods out there, being just one

isolated ingredient from a plant, rendering the rest of the plant waste. Palm oil is the second major source of deforestation behind livestock. According to the *Union of Concerned Scientists*, "The large majority of palm oil production occurs in just two countries, Malaysia and Indonesia, where huge swaths of tropical forests and peatlands (carbon-rich swamps) are being cleared to make way for oil palm plantations, releasing carbon into the atmosphere to drive global warming while shrinking habitats for a multitude of endangered species."<sup>12</sup>

### 3. Ban the Beef; Dig the Beans.

Beef consumption is associated with all common chronic diseases particularly cancer, diabetes, and heart disease, as well as premature death. It promotes gastrointestinal problems and eating it regularly, (along with any other animal protein), overburdens the kidneys. Beef is a great source of saturated fat and heme iron, both of which are associated with heart disease. It's easy to absorb iron in heme form and is toxic in excess.

Environmentally, beef is the

most resource-intensive food we produce, causing the most environmental degradation including deforestation and water contamination. Compared to potatoes, wheat, and rice, raising livestock for beef demands 160 times more land and produces 11 times more greenhouse gases. "Only a minute fraction of the food consumed by cattle goes into the bloodstream, so the bulk of the energy is lost," according to lead researcher Gidon Eshel.<sup>13</sup> The massive amount of water and other resources needed for beef production would be better used to feed the world's hungry directly and provide water to those in need. "The biggest intervention people could make towards reducing their carbon footprints would not be to abandon cars, but to eat significantly less red meat," says Professor Tim Benton, a champion for Global Food Security.<sup>14</sup>

### 2. Eat Your Veggies!—Every Day.

This is what protects us against environmental toxins and supplies vitamins and minerals along with a symphony of nutrients that work together to find and maintain health. Note that the colors of vegetables are

also the chemical antioxidants that restore and heal skin on the outside and organs on the inside. They clean our blood and shield us from bacteria, viruses, and free radicals that do damage and cause inflammation. Nutrients, along with fiber and phytonutrients found together in colorful, whole plant foods (including fruits!) work together in a dance of interaction to do your body good. These are the superfoods that we need to consume several times a day, every day.

As a group, field-grown veggies produce the least GHG emissions. Organically grown crops produce relatively similar GHG emissions to those of conventional systems due to the trade-off between synthetic fertilizer verses manure in organic systems. Organic produce generally demands more soil and land, though locally-grown produce can save on transportation emissions. Greenhouse-grown produce uses more fossil fuel than does field-grown.<sup>11-13</sup> Sprouting seeds on your kitchen counter produces no GHG emissions at all, supplying the end-product of wild, edible plants, which are the healthiest foods on the planet!

## I. Eliminate Dairy.

This food is “Miracle Grow”—perfectly designed to stimulate growth in babies—that is, for babies designed to grow from sixty pounds to six hundred pounds, fueled on their mamma’s milk. Humans aren’t meant to grow that big, and growth hormones such as insulin-like growth factor (IGF-1) in cow milk may stimulate unintended growth. Filled with saturated fat and troublesome animal proteins that encourage acne, weight gain, and growth of unwanted cells (like cancer and fibroids), dairy foods (including fluid milk, cheese, yogurt, and kefir) are up there as some of the most problematic foods that we consume. Many of us—75% of the world’s population—have trouble digesting dairy, and many find that joint pain, inflammation, diabetes, and some autoimmune reactions are finally in check after kicking it out of our systems. This is the number-one food to dump from the diet for a health boost.

Growing grain or soy to feed cows that supply milk is quite an inefficient and fuel-sucking way to feed ourselves.

Consider that it takes ten pounds of milk to make a pound of cheese, multiplying the energy demands of dairy by ten-fold—and we eat a lot of cheese! Animals eat more than the food produced from them. It’s much more efficient and environmentally-friendly to eat grain and other plant foods directly. Though GHG emissions from fluid milk production are much lower than food produced from the meat of ruminant animals, water use is huge. Cows drink a lot (an estimated 5,000 gallons over their shortened lifetime), and eat a lot, (hey, they’re lactating, constantly impregnated baby machines!) Compared to humans, who drink roughly a gallon of water or less per day, cows need around 23 gallons per day.

According to the research of David Pimentel, PhD, 683 gallons of water are needed to grow six pounds of alfalfa that the average bovine will need to eat to produce a gallon of milk. California, the largest dairy-producing state in the U.S., devotes twenty percent of its water to alfalfa to achieve this, mostly in the dry, arid Central Valley.

Summing up, ruminant livestock tops the list of energy demand, environmental degradation, GHG emissions and resource use, while vegetable production gently weighs in at the bottom. As Professor Bruce Monger points out, “For every 100 calories of grain we feed animals, we get only about 40 new calories of milk, 22 calories of eggs, 12 of chicken, 10 of pork, or 3 of beef. Most studies present an array of actions that are needed to address the looming food security issue, but in almost all cases, one element of this array of actions is a shift to reduce global meat consumption.” Luckily for us humans, the healthiest diet for our planet is also the one that allows for optimal health. That is a diet based on whole plant foods. ■

*Kathy Pollard, MS., is co-founder of SustainableDiet.com and a former instructor for the T. Colin Campbell CNS certification course in plant-based nutrition. Her upcoming book, Climate Party! is about the connection between food choices and climate change. Visit KathrynPollard.com.*

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