

Crunch Time!

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Revitalize yourself with a plant-based eating plan that celebrates fresh fruits and veggies.

By Lavinia Spalding

San Francisco yoga teacher Stacey Rosenberg had a diet that most people would consider ultra-healthy. Most of the time, she ate organic and locally sourced food, avoided processed ingredients, and listened carefully to her body's cues about what she needed to be eating and how much. But when her teaching schedule turned hectic, she began to opt for quick and easy options like heavy burritos and sandwiches or a slice of pizza from her favorite bakery. "I was falling off some of my healthy habits," she says, "and I wanted to bring whole foods and greens back into my diet."

Rosenberg enrolled in the Eat Green Challenge, an online program started by clinical Ayurvedic specialist Cate Stillman and yoga instructor Desiree Rumbaugh to help friends in the yoga community shift to a plant-based diet. "I don't like making rules for myself around food," says Rosenberg, "but the Eat Green Challenge seemed tailored to each person—you just did your best and noticed how foods made you feel."

For the next 30 days, Rosenberg ate almost nothing but fruits and veggies. She felt clearheaded and hydrated, stopped craving sweets, and noticed improvements in her yoga practice. "I trimmed and toned up," she says. "I felt cleaner, and I had more energy."

After the cleanse, Rosenberg slowly added small amounts of protein, fat, and grains to her meals, listening to her body and trusting her intuition as she went. Now, she starts each day with plenty of water and green smoothies. She fills up on salads, soups, sweet potatoes, and stews, and if she's craving sweets, she reaches for an apple or a banana before a bar of chocolate. When she does find herself indulging in less-than-healthy food, she cleanses the following day.

Spring Cleaning

If you're like Rosenberg and others in the yoga community, you probably already eat relatively clean and green. But springtime may inspire you to kick things up a notch. It's no mystery why the season invites renewal. Longer days increase our exposure to sunlight, creating a biological surge of energy and optimism. So while everyone else clears cobwebs and scours floors, why not take a look at your diet and spring-clean an even more important home: your body?

Shifting to primarily plant-based foods may be the smartest move you can make to reconnect with healthy eating habits, says Amy Lanou, a senior nutrition scientist with the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine. "I'm a huge proponent of building a diet from whole foods," she says, "or foods that have been processed a limited amount."

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According to Lanou, cleaning up your diet starts with avoiding what's added during processing—think salt, sugar, fat, flavorings, colorings, and preservatives. Likewise, she says, much of what we actually do want to consume is removed when foods are refined. "If something has been peeled, washed, fried, diced, sliced, and extruded, you lose a lot of vitamins and minerals." By focusing on whole foods, Lanou says, you'll be well on your way to eating more healthfully.

It sounds simple enough, but we all know that changing eating patterns is complicated. The body becomes adapted to what we feed it, and eliminating certain ingredients can be difficult and even physically uncomfortable. Also, busy lives can make a significant dietary reset even harder.

But for those in the yoga community, refreshing your palate and embracing a healthier approach to eating isn't as difficult as you may think, says Stillman, who also teaches Iyengar and Anusara Yogas. "In yoga," she explains, "we're awakening our subtle body physiology, becoming more sensitive, and perceiving everything more accurately. We're much more aware of our mind-body connection than ever before."

Shifting Gears

In the first step of the challenge, a 30-day fruit and vegetable cleanse called "the megashift," participants eat only fresh vegetables and fruits, avoiding meat, dairy, grains, salt, and even healthy fats like oils, avocados, beans, nuts, and seeds. Salads are dressed with mango juice and red pepper, or papaya, mint, and lime juice; snacks are green beans, jicama, and celery sticks. Dinner might be zucchini noodles with tomatoes.

The idea is to detoxify your system and cleanse your palate, not to deprive yourself or go hungry. "For the first few weeks I felt like I was eating all day long," recalls Rosenberg. "Carrot sticks, grapes, strawberries, peaches, plums, potatoes, soups, salads and smoothies."

In fact, says Sharon Meyer, a clinical nutritionist with the Institute for Health and Healing at the California Pacific Medical Center in San Francisco, fruits and veggies contain fewer calories than most other foods, so you'll have to eat more-and more often-to stabilize your energy and avoid fatigue. If you experience major highs and lows in your energy level, she says, add a small amount of oil (such as olive, ghee, or coconut) to help regulate blood sugar and insulin—or include some protein like fish or egg in your diet.

With a significant increase in fruit consumption, adds Lanou, you may experience some digestive issues, specifically loose bowels. If this happens, she recommends adding more vegetables, along with a few nuts and some low-fiber grains. Otherwise, she says, you may not absorb enough nutrients.

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For those who want or need to include small amounts of grains, seeds, legumes, and animal protein from the start, the plan is still effective as a reset, says Stillman. It can also be maintained as a long-term approach to eating.

"There's no one diet that's perfect for everyone," adds Meyer. "And that gets to be very exciting because it leads to curiosity about how your body is functioning with different foods."

Listen Up

When you temporarily remove ingredients from your diet, you can reset the palate and curb junk-food cravings in the process. By weaning yourself off sweets, says Stillman, you can alter your sensitivity to them. The same is true for salt; studies indicate that if you usually eat four grams and cut back significantly, food that you used to enjoy will taste too salty to eat. You'll also be able to distinguish nutrient-rich food from less beneficial options, says Stillman. "Processed food will taste like cardboard."

When you begin to add other foods to your diet, Meyer suggests holding back on grains initially, starting instead with an easy-to-digest protein like fish or eggs for three days. When you do add grains, start with rice, which is one of the least allergenic.

Stillman suggests slowly reintroducing fat to your diet until it makes up about 10 percent of what you're eating. "Many yogis will naturally stabilize here," she says. Adding more may cause congestion and bloating. Choose healthful plant-based fats, she says: avocados, olive oil, nuts, seeds, and almond milk.

However you decide to modify your plant-based regimen, Stillman and Lanou advocate a diet abundant in living foods. For those who find raw veggies difficult to digest, Stillman suggests lightly steaming them or making marinated salads to keep at room temperature. "Grate or slice up fennel, massage kale with fruit juice, shred a carrot or beet, and let it all sit together for a few hours to make it more absorbable."

Will a diet that consists primarily of fruits and veggies provide all the nutrients you need long term? Yes, says Lanou, provided that you also include nuts, seeds, legumes, and a supplement or fortified foods rich in vitamin B12. "There shouldn't be any problem getting sufficient protein if a person is getting enough calories from whole plant foods," she says. As for calcium, most dark leafy greens (for example kale, chard, dandelion) have about the same amount of absorbable calcium per serving as a cup of cow's milk. There's also plenty of fiber in fruits and veggies, not to mention carbohydrates, phytonutrients, and antioxidants.

Of course, certain people should consult their doctor before making any significant dietary changes. The Eat Green Challenge isn't recommended for those who are pregnant or underweight, for example, and children and athletes may need extra protein.

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In the end, the foods you add to your diet are just as important as those you cut from it—and embracing the idea of happily supplementing rather than reluctantly subtracting can transform your entire experience. It helps to simply reach for fruits, roots, and vegetables first—before anything else—until they become a greater percentage of your diet, says Stillman. It's easy to do, she adds, if you prepare your food for the entire day in the morning.

"Put sweet potatoes in the oven, turn on your rice cooker, make a quart of green smoothies, and call it good," says Stillman. "For breakfast, have a green smoothie or two, which gets you through to lunch. Then there are the sweet potatoes, and you throw a quick salad together. For dinner, have fresh fruit, a salad, and the rice you cooked."

"It's not that you'll never touch a piece of pizza again," says Stillman. "But have a gigantic salad first. The idea is to get more filled up on the foods that are truly nutritive."

If you think about it, it's a lot like spring cleaning. We clear clutter to make space for what's more meaningful, beautiful, and important.