

Nutritional Update for Physicians: Plant-Based Diets



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Abstract

The objective of this article is to present to physicians an update on plant-based diets. Concerns about the rising cost of health care are being voiced nationwide, even as unhealthy lifestyles are contributing to the spread of obesity, diabetes, and cardiovascular disease. For these reasons, physicians looking for cost-effective interventions to improve health outcomes are becoming more involved in helping their patients adopt healthier lifestyles. Healthy eating may be best achieved with a plant-based diet, which we define as a regimen that encourages whole, plant-based foods and discourages meats, dairy products, and eggs as well as all refined and processed foods. We present a case study as an example of the potential health benefits of such a diet. Research shows that plant-based diets are cost-effective, low-risk interventions that may lower body mass index, blood pressure, HbA1C, and cholesterol levels. They may also reduce the number of medications needed to treat chronic diseases and lower ischemic heart disease mortality rates. Physicians should consider recommending a plant-based diet to all their patients, especially those with high blood pressure, diabetes, cardiovascular disease, or obesity.

Introduction

In the HBO documentary *The Weight of the Nation*, it was noted that if you “go with the flow” in the US, you will eventually become obese.¹ In 2011, Witters reported that in some areas of the country, the rate of obesity is 39% and is increasing at a rate of 5% per year.² Risks of obesity, diabetes, hypertension, and cardiovascular disease, along with their ensuing complications (eg, behavioral health and quality-of-life problems) often go hand-in-hand and are strongly linked to lifestyle, especially dietary choices.³ Of all the diets recommended over the last few decades to turn the tide of these chronic illnesses, the best but perhaps least common may be those that are plant based.

Despite the strong body of evidence favoring plant-based diets, including studies showing a willingness of the general public to embrace them,⁴ many physicians are not stressing the importance of plant-based diets as a first-line treatment for chronic illnesses. This could be because of a lack of awareness of these diets or a