

Meatless Meals, Source The American Heart Association

What's the deal with meatless meals?

Well, it seems that leaving out the meat is good for you. In fact, it could help lower your cholesterol and reduce your risk for cardiovascular disease. Best of all, a semi-vegetarian or flexitarian eating style doesn't require you to completely give up your carnivorous ways. You can totally eat lean meat – just less of it! We'll let the experts explain.

Expert Tip #1:

Most of the cholesterol-raising saturated fats that Americans eat come from meat and full-fat dairy products such as whole milk cheese," said Alice Lichtenstein, D.Sc., a professor of nutrition at Tufts University and an AHA volunteer. "If you decrease your daily intake of animal fat, you're going to decrease your intake of saturated fat.

What's in a meatless meal?

What does your dinner look like when you take meat off the menu? Your meal won't be boring and there are more options than you'd think! For example – craving a burger? Try a savory grilled portabella mushroom burger.

Expert Tip #2:

Going meatless are as simple as moving vegetables and fruits from a side dish to a starring role. You should also seek out high-fiber whole grains, beans and legumes, unsalted nuts, and lower fat and fat-free dairy foods. These tend to be high in fiber, vitamins, minerals and other important phytonutrients," said Rachel Johnson, Ph.D., R.D., a nutrition professor at the University of Vermont and AHA volunteer.

Start with small steps.

Expert Tip #3:

"An easy way to get started is to eat one meatless meal a week," suggests Dr. Johnson. Sticking with it can quickly make you start feeling lighter and your wallet fatter: People who eat less meat tend to consume fewer calories, and foods such as beans are one of the most cost-effective sources of protein available. Meat typically costs more per pound than other protein sources.

If meatless is not for you, don't worry. You don't have to go cold turkey on meat to adopt a heart-healthy eating style. Are you a fan of chicken or fish? Skinless poultry and fish containing [omega-3 fatty acids](#) are good protein choices and easy to prepare in healthy ways.

Gotta have meat? Limit it to once in a while.

When you do eat meat, choose the leanest cut available, reduce your [portion size](#) to no more than 6 oz cooked, remove all visible fat, and cook in a healthy way to avoid excess [saturated fats](#). And remember, a meatless meal doesn't automatically translate to less saturated fat.

Expert Tip #4:

"You can drop meat, but if you substitute quiche for steak, you're not going to get any advantage in terms of heart health," Dr. Lichtenstein cautioned. Make sure you're making healthy swaps.

More tips for going meatless:

- **Keep the refrigerator and pantry stocked** with plant-based alternatives like vegetables, beans, nuts, whole grains and tofu.
- **Find recipes for meatless meals** and get your cook on! The American Heart Association offers hundreds of healthy, delicious plant-based entrees in our cookbooks and online recipe center.
- **Go veggie at work.** If you have access to an office kitchen, keep a few convenient meatless foods you like, such as veggie burgers and vegetarian microwavable meals, on hand for a quick, meatless lunch.