



## Flexitarian diet: what you need to know

It's no secret plant-based diets\* have increased in popularity over the last few years. In fact, in 2021 more than 50 per cent of Canadians reported a willingness to reduce their meat consumption<sup>1</sup>. Evidently, there is a demand for more flexibility and versatility in diets and as such, the flexitarian diet has grown in popularity with nearly 10 per cent of Canadians having adopted it as their preferred dietary approach<sup>2</sup>.

Whether you are already embracing the flexitarian diet, or interested in learning more, this article explores some of the key details and benefits of this flexible plant-based diet.

### What is a flexitarian diet?

The flexitarian diet is a semi-vegetarian diet. The term flexitarian combines the words flexible and vegetarian. The flexitarian diet corresponds to an omnivorous diet that focuses more on plant-based foods and less on meat. It is a dietary approach that is inclusive, diverse and balanced, and is rooted in eating nutritious plant-based foods, varying amounts of fish and dairy, and lower quantities of meat<sup>3,4,5</sup>. It provides a realistic, flexible way to eat more plant-based foods, while promoting variety and inclusiveness of foods, and being adaptable to people's dietary needs, preferences and cultures.

The flexitarian diet is an example of a sustainable healthy diet and provides an accessible foundation for a healthy and balanced lifestyle<sup>6</sup>. It is an attractive choice because of its focus on variety rather than restriction, but also because of cost savings associated with eating less meat<sup>1</sup>, and the benefits to one's health and the planet.

### Health and environmental benefits of a flexitarian diet

The food diversity and balance offered through the flexitarian diet help us get the nutrients we need to support optimal health and gut health, while also reducing risk for chronic diseases<sup>7</sup>.

In flexitarian diets, and through the diversity of foods consumed, we are exposed to nutrient-dense foods high in dietary fibre, high-quality protein, vitamins, minerals, and healthy fats like omega-3 fatty acids, all of which can contribute to a higher diet quality. In addition, flexitarian diets are associated with a lower risk of cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, certain types of cancer and obesity<sup>8</sup>, and research has shown that adopting a flexitarian diet is associated with a 19% reduction in premature death<sup>5</sup>.

Globally, studies have shown that a shift to plant-based diets is not only beneficial to our health, but also the health of the planet<sup>9</sup>. Flexitarian diets may minimize the environmental impact of food systems across the globe, relieving pressures on the ecosystem with less land, water and energy use<sup>10,11,12,13</sup>. Flexitarian diets are also estimated to reduce global greenhouse gas emissions by nearly 50 per cent<sup>8</sup>. Additionally, by promoting variety, flexitarian diets enable diverse food production and support the global biodiversity of plants, animals and microorganisms.

By neither eliminating nor over-relying on any type of food, flexitarian diets not only support a healthier lifestyle and planet, but also promote the pleasure of eating to suit different taste preferences, dietary needs and more.

### Looking to get started with a flexitarian diet?

Here are some simple modifications you can make to experience it for yourself:

- Consume plenty of plant-based foods, including vegetables, fruits and whole grains, which provide key nutrients like vitamins and minerals, dietary fibre and healthy fats.
- When purchasing your groceries, remember to prioritize a good balance between plant and animal protein foods in your shopping cart. Try to select, more often, items that come from plants, such as pulses (for example beans, peas, chickpeas, lentils), soy products (for example tofu, soybeans, fortified soy beverage), nuts and seeds<sup>14</sup> – you'll be amazed by the variety of options available!
- Try consuming a more diverse mix of meat/protein sources, including varying amounts of fish and dairy, particularly fermented dairy products like yogurt.
- Limit highly processed foods\*\* that are high in sodium, added sugars and saturated fats<sup>15</sup>.
- And most important of all – have fun enjoying a varied and diverse diet that doesn't require you to eliminate any food!

With a few simple tweaks, anyone can adopt a flexitarian diet and enjoy its many health and environmental benefits.

\* Plant-based diets encompass a variety of diets including vegan, vegetarian, and semi-vegetarian.

\*\* Highly processed foods are those processed or prepared foods and drinks that add excess sodium, sugars or saturated fat to the diets of Canadians, and can include sugary drinks, chocolate and candies, fast foods, frozen entrées, bakery products, processed meats<sup>15</sup>.

*This article was developed by Danone Canada in collaboration with the Canadian Nutrition Society to educate Canadians about the benefits of adopting a flexitarian diet.*

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- <sup>1</sup> Sylvain Charlebois, Director Agri-Food Analytics Lab, Dalhousie University. 2021. [COVID-19 Beef consumption](#).
- <sup>2</sup> Sylvain Charlebois, Director Agri-Food Analytics Lab, Dalhousie University. 2021. The Canadian protein market: Today and tomorrow.
- <sup>3</sup> Willett W et al. [Food in the Anthropocene: the EAT-Lancet Commission on healthy diets from sustainable food systems](#). Lancet 2019;393(10170):447-92.
- <sup>4</sup> Yogurt in Nutrition Initiative for Sustainable and Balanced Diets. 2019. [What is a flexitarian diet or flexitarianism?](#)
- <sup>5</sup> Springmann M et al. [Health and nutritional aspects of sustainable diet strategies and their association with environmental impacts: a global modelling analysis with country-level detail](#). Lancet Planet Health 2018;2(10):e451-61.
- <sup>6</sup> Schmidt CV and Mouritsen OG. [The solution to sustainable eating is not a one-way street](#). Front Psychol 2020;11:531.
- <sup>7</sup> Singh RK et al. [Influence of diet on the gut microbiome and implications for human health](#). J Transl Med 2017;15(1):73.
- <sup>8</sup> Derbyshire EJ. [Flexitarian diets and health: a review of the evidence-based literature](#). Front Nutr 2016;3:55.
- <sup>9</sup> FAO and WHO. 2019. [Sustainable healthy diets – guiding principles](#). Rome.
- <sup>10</sup> Hallstrom E et al. [Environmental impact of dietary change: a systematic review](#). J Clean Prod 2015;91:1-11.
- <sup>11</sup> Nelson ME et al. [Alignment of healthy dietary patterns and environmental sustainability: a systematic review](#). Adv Nutr 2016;7(6):1005-25.
- <sup>12</sup> Aleksandrowicz L et al. [The impacts of dietary change on greenhouse gas emissions, land use, water use, and health: a systematic review](#). PLoS One 2016;11(11):e0165797.
- <sup>13</sup> Jarmul S et al. [Climate change mitigation through dietary change: a systematic review of empirical and modelling studies on the environmental footprints and health effects of ‘sustainable diets’](#). Environ Res Lett 2020;15:123014.
- <sup>14</sup> Canada’s Food Guide. 2019. [Eat protein foods](#).
- <sup>15</sup> Canada’s Food Guide. 2019. [Limit highly processed foods](#).