

# The main reasons to switch to a plant-based diet

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National Meat Free Week (Nationale Week Zonder Vlees, 7–13 March) is an initiative to reduce meat consumption. Assistant professor Paul Behrens is studying what impact a change in our food consumption

would have on the world. What, according to him, are the main reasons to switch to a (mainly) plant-based diet?

"If you look all the different types of environmental impacts, switching to a plant-based diet is the single largest action that we can take as individuals," says Behrens. "Food systems are behind energy when it comes to driving climate change but they still make up a third of all emissions. It is an important way in which individuals can have a big impact."

## **Environmental impact**

A plant-based diet contributes in many different ways to a cleaner environment, says Behrens. "Livestock farming is disastrous for biodiversity and is the biggest driver of biodiversity loss worldwide. The manure from [animal agriculture](#) runs off into waterways, causing algae to grow and depleting the water of oxygen creating dead zones. There are [greenhouse gas emissions](#) from the belching of cattle, manure, and the use of fertilizer to grow crops to feed to livestock. In the US, researchers found that [livestock farming](#) is the largest agricultural contributor to air pollution. I haven't even touched on soil pollution when stocking levels are too high, or [antibiotic resistance](#) driven by the antibiotics fed to animals worldwide. The list goes on."

## **CO<sub>2</sub> emissions**

A plant-based diet helps reduce CO<sub>2</sub> emissions in several ways, says Behrens. "You no longer have animals that produce methane and you also reduce the energy inefficiency of the system. Feeding plants to animals and animals to us creates a lot of inefficiency. Getting rid of that middleman, or middle cow in this case, saves land, emissions and reduces other environmental impacts."

## More nature around us

The livestock sector uses a huge amount of land, says Behrens. If we were to eat a plant-based diet, this land could be used for other purposes, such as nature reserves. "Around half of all habitable land is used for agriculture. Eighty percent of this is used for livestock farming. Our research shows that switching to a plant-based diet in high-income nations would save an area the size of the EU worldwide. You can imagine what an improvement this would make to biodiversity, water quality, [flood control](#) and people's mental health if they had more nature around them."

## Mainly plant-based diet is healthier

In terms of health, a plant-based diet also makes a significant difference. "People can still eat meat. You won't die if you eat a steak," says Behrens. "But my advice would be to cut down on meat as much as possible. That won't be easy for everyone. That is why in our studies we often look at the EAT-Lancet diet. This seeks a balance between health and sustainability. Even if we allow for some meat though we're talking very small amounts—a burger or steak once every couple of weeks at the very maximum. The diet also suggests you can cut out animal products entirely and be healthy."

For many people, today's [meat consumption](#) isn't healthy, says Behrens. "Avoiding the over-consumption of meat has great health benefits, such as a reduced risk of cardiovascular disease." Behrens has discovered another advantage of a meat-free diet. "I've not had food poisoning since I became vegetarian. I think it's to do with the fact that you never have any issues with cooked and uncooked meats, but maybe I'm just a bad cook," he laughs.

## Discoveries

Even if you are well aware of the advantages of a plant-based diet, meat can be tempting at times, Behrens admits. "What I found difficult to give up was chicken curry. I still remember eating it as a child once a week as the special meal of the week. But the chicken substitutes are perfect nowadays, and that makes it a lot easier."

Behrens has another tip for people who want to eat more plant-based food but find it difficult to change their behavior. "See it as an exploration, rather than a sacrifice. A voyage of discovery can be difficult at times, but it can also be exciting. And the more often you do it, the easier it becomes. There are so many interesting vegetarian options on restaurant menus now."

Behrens gives the example of his search for alternatives to cheese. "I try to eat as little cheese as possible so I recently tried some vegan cheeses. I'm not a purist. I sometimes eat eggs and cheese. But everyone has their own path to follow. The sooner you begin, the easier it becomes." Switching also has an impact on your social environment, he says. "You make the options visible to the people around you. Research shows that if more plant-based options are available, even people who eat a lot of meat will explore the new veggie possibilities."

Provided by Leiden University

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