



Eat Your Greens with Dr. Black | plant-based nutrition for the whole family

Episode 4 of Eat Your Greens with Dr. Black: Embracing Plant-based Diets

So, my friend, why is it important for kids to eat healthy food?

It's because it'll get them energy and it'll make them more healthy and heart beating. Their heart will be healthier when it's beeping. You're right. Good job. And strongness. And strength. Strength. Yeah. What are your favorite healthy foods? Uh, like, I don't eat cheese so often because it has a lot of milk in it, but I like cucumbers, apples, uh, watermelons, and kiwis. Kiwis, yum. And your dad told me that when you go out to eat with your family at the restaurant, they all get cheeseburgers, and you get salad. Yes. Is that right? Good job.

Welcome to Eat Your Greens with Dr. Black, where we discuss plant-based nutrition for the whole family. This podcast is all about supporting families in their efforts to give their children a solid foundation of healthy eating habits that will last a lifetime. I'm your host. Dr. Angela Black. I'm a board-certified pediatrician with over 20 years of experience.

Over the course of my career, I've witnessed the rise of issues like high blood pressure, type 2 diabetes, and even fatty liver disease in kids as young as 10. I'm passionate about using evidence-based guidelines to teach my patients and their parents how to prevent chronic diseases for a lifetime of health.

I hope you find this podcast to be informative. And empowering for more episodes, or if you would like more information about child nutrition and feeding, please visit www.eatgreenswithdrblack.com.

Hi, and welcome back. This is episode four of eat your greens with Dr. Black. This is part two of our deep dive into how the standard American diet and a whole food plant-based diet compare. In part one, we sat down in the exam room with the entire population of the United States and other developed Western countries and took a look at things like what the standard American or standard Western diet actually is and what it's doing to us, what are the symptoms.

We sat down and. Talked about what kinds of foods we're eating, what processed foods are, the difference between minimally processed foods and ultra-processed foods. And we went into some detail about what it's doing to us, how those ultra-processed foods are affecting our health. So now that we've taken a good history, looked in detail at the lifestyle habits and made a diagnosis, let's move on to treatment.

In part two of this two-part series, we're going to talk about a whole food plant-based diet, and I'll explain exactly what that is. I'm going to count down the top 10 reasons why eating this way is beneficial for your health. Last, I'm going to share a few tips about how to transition over to eating a more plant inclusive diet.



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So, let's get started. Please be aware that this podcast provides general health information about nutrition and feeding of infants and children and is meant for educational purposes only. It's not intended to replace the important relationship between a parent, child, and pediatrician. If you have concerns about your child's nutrition, health, or growth, please consult your doctor.

In recent years, there has been a surge in the popularity of plant-based diets as more and more people recognize the numerous health benefits that come with embracing this lifestyle. People have different reasons for why they might want to go more plant based. The number one reason that people cite is the health benefits.

In my case, my journey towards going 100 percent plant based started when my mom died suddenly of a heart attack. Learn We know that a whole food plant-based diet reduces the risk of cardiovascular disease, diabetes, cancer, etc. All those things we talked about in the first part of this two-part series.

Other people are drawn to more plant-based eating because of the benefit to the environment. They want to reduce their carbon footprint and live in a way that's more sustainable. The third most common reason that people want to avoid eating foods, uh, derived from animal origins is because of their concern for animal welfare.

Those concentrated animal feeding operations, the CAFOs, are really horrendously cruel to, uh, all of the animals that are involved in those operations. They're overcrowded, they're sick, and they don't have any of the freedom that animals should enjoy. So, let's get started with the definition. A whole food, plant-based diet is a dietary approach that emphasizes the consumption of nutrient rich, whole plant foods.

So, what do we mean by whole foods? Wouldn't it be great if when I talked about whole foods, I meant that you get to eat all the bagels and donuts that your heart desires? Sadly, no. Whole foods are simply foods that have not been processed. Remember when we talked about minimally and ultra-processed foods?

So, a whole food is recognizable as something that you could find in nature. It doesn't come in that package, or it has minimal packaging, and you don't need to read the label with all the 500 different ingredients to figure out what's in it. You're going to find these foods mostly around like the perimeter of the grocery store.

You know, head over to the produce department and pick up a head of broccoli. All you have to do is look at it. You know what it is. It's broccoli. You don't need that list of ingredients. Other examples of whole foods are going to be things like dried beans and brown rice. Nuts, something like a salmon filet.

Often, whole foods are the ingredients that we use to make a home cooked meal from scratch. These foods have all of the nutrients and fiber intact, and they don't have a ton



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of added preservatives or sugar or unhealthy fats. So, recall from part one that Processing is anything we do to alter food from its natural state.

Some degree of processing is necessary, of course, like the chopping, cooking, chewing. Nobody's going to go out and eat a dried bean. I mean, to begin with, you're going to break your teeth, and you can't digest them. If you follow some of the, um, popular fad diet enthusiasts, you might have heard about something called antinutrients.

Antinutrients are compounds like phytates and lectins, and some of these quacks, basically, will tell you that beans in particular or other legumes are bad for you because they contain these anti nutrients that block the absorption of other nutrients or are toxic in some way. Basically, all you really need to know is that a little bit of processing in the form of soaking and cooking beans and lentils and other legumes will remove most of these potentially harmful compounds.

And allow you to get all the great health benefits associated with legumes. If you've heard of something called the Blue Zones, a Blue Zone is an area in the world where people regularly live, uh, very long lives, over a hundred years of age. And there've been a, there's been a lot of interest in studying these parts of the world to see what are they doing differently.

And one of the number one things that all of these Blue Zones have in common is their intake. of legumes, beans, foods like that. So, it really makes no sense whatsoever that these anti nutrients are going to harm you when you eat those foods. So, uh, just want to throw that out there if you've heard of anti-nutrients.

So, a whole food plant-based diet relies on these minimally processed foods as much as possible and aims to greatly reduce the amount of those ultra-processed foods. So, let's move on to the plant-based part. I mean, that's pretty obvious, right? When we talk about plant-based foods, we're talking about things that grow from the ground or grow on trees.

Fruits, vegetables, grains, beans, nuts. When we eat a plant-based diet, we're getting the majority of our food from plants, duh, and a lot less, or none, from animal sources. Sometimes, though, people are confused about the different names out there referring to the different styles of eating. I've had families in the office ask me to tell them what it means, uh, when somebody is, say, vegetarian versus vegan.

So, let's just talk about some basic definitions and what are the different styles of eating. To begin with, we have omnivores, right? An omnivore is somebody who eats any kind of food, animal, vegetable, or mineral. Then we have a pescetarian. A pescetarian is somebody who usually is going to cut out the land animals, beef, pork, chicken, but they'll eat fish, shellfish, and usually eggs and dairy as well.



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The next level is Lacto-Ovo Vegetarian, and usually this is just called Vegetarian. A Vegetarian will cut out the land animals and the aquatic animals, uh, but they will still eat things like eggs and dairy in addition to the plant-based foods. And then on the farthest end of the plant-based eating scale, we have vegans.

Vegans will cut out all animal derived products, and in fact, a strict vegan also will not eat honey, and they won't wear or use products made from leather. Some people will say that they eat 100 percent plant based instead of calling themselves a vegan to imply that they don't necessarily follow that stricter vegan lifestyle.

Last, there's something that you might have heard of called a flexitarian. A flexitarian is somebody who generally tries to stick to that vegan or vegetarian diet, but, you know, they choose to remain flexible. Every once in a while, they'll eat meat or fish or something like that if the occasion calls for it.

So, the healthiest type of diet is going to have both of these components. It's going to be whole food and plant based. Let's not forget that things like Oreos and potato chips and French fries are all vegan. They are 100 percent plant based. But, you know, nobody is arguing that these are health foods, right?

So, we really want to incorporate that. Whole food component, in addition to the plant-based component. Nowadays, you're seeing the grocery store shelves and many restaurants offering these, uh, meat alternatives, right? Things like the Impossible or Beyond. Uh, these are processed foods that are very similar to meat in texture and flavor.

And they do have their pros and cons, just like anything, right? So, for example, they do have fiber. Uh, fiber is something that only comes from plants. Animals do not have fiber. So, and, and it's a very important part of your, of a healthy diet. Westerners almost never get enough of it. So that's a, that's a benefit to these processed meat alternatives that they have fiber.

They are better for the environment, right? We're not using all that land and water energy. We're not releasing all the greenhouse gas emissions that come with animal agriculture. On the other hand, though, many of them use coconut oil as the main fat to give it the flavor and the texture that mimics meat.

And unfortunately, coconut and palm oils are high in saturated fat, and saturated fat is the fat that's going to promote higher cholesterol levels and raise your risk of heart disease and diabetes. And it doesn't matter if the saturated fat comes from an animal or a plant, it does the same thing in your body.

Also, these processed meat alternatives contain more unhealthy sugar and salt than something, say, like a bean-based burger. And then last, they are more expensive. So



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generally, the most healthy diet really does need both components, whole foods, and plant-based foods. But, you know, there are times when you just want a burger.

And if these newer products are going to satisfy that in a healthier way, then so be it. That's fine.

So, we started out with what. What is a whole food plant-based diet? Let's move on to the why. Why bother? Like I asked before in the first part, aren't meat and dairy good for you? I mean, you get all that protein and calcium so you can have big muscles and strong bones. That's what I was taught when I was a kid.

It's pretty common for parents to worry when their toddler is picky about eating meat or their teen says they want to be a vegetarian. So, let's talk about it. In fact, let's do a countdown of the top 10 reasons why you should consider including more plant-based foods in your daily diet. Honestly, each one of these really could be an entire podcast episode all on its own.

So, I'm going to try to keep it brief. Otherwise, this is going to turn into a three-hour dissertation, and nobody has time for that. Um, but don't forget, I do practice evidence-based medicine. So, check out the website. www.eatgreenswithdrblack.com. You're going to find the show notes for this episode and links to a bunch of the research.

If you want to read that. Plant based diets can greatly benefit athletes. They can do this by not only enhancing their performance, but also aiding in a post workout recovery. So, to begin with, we have foods like whole grains, fruits, and starchy vegetables. These foods offer a steady source of carbohydrates.

Carbohydrates are what our body uses for energy. This is going to fuel your workout, and it's going to support optimal performance. Contrary to common beliefs, plant-based diets can provide enough protein for building muscle mass. Some excellent plant-based sources will include things like beans, lentils, and peas, soy foods like tofu and tempeh, nuts, and grains.

You can get all the protein you need to be a world class competitive bodybuilder on a plant-based diet. It's been documented that even one meal high in the saturated fat from either animal products or, like I said, palm oil and coconut oil will make your blood vessels stiffer. Even one meal can change.

The ability of your blood vessels to constrict and dilate. And this reduces their ability to deliver oxygen rich blood to your muscles during exercise. So, a plant-based meal on the other hand, can improve your endurance and contribute to better performance by promoting that elasticity of the blood vessels.



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This means they can dilate during high intensity workouts and deliver more blood to muscles when it's needed. Better nutrition. Duh. A plant-based diet offers an abundance of vitamins and minerals, which are vital for maintaining optimal health. This could actually be a really long list of vitamins and minerals, so I'll just name a few.

To start with, plant-based foods are high in vitamin C. Vitamin C will boost your immune system, it keeps your skin healthy, and it promotes wound healing. Also, it prevents scurvy, which is good. Great. If you're a pirate, vitamin C is found in citrus fruits, tomatoes, bell peppers, uh, you know, honestly, pretty much most plant-based foods have lots of vitamin C.

Also, plants are rich in vitamin E. Vitamin E is a powerful antioxidant. It can be found in sunflower seeds. Avocados and green leafy vegetables like spinach and collard greens. Antioxidants are needed to reduce inflammation. They help fight off cancer and can also help prevent premature aging. Folate.

Folate reduces the risk of birth defects, especially those of the nervous system. You can find an abundance of folate in brussels sprouts, asparagus, and enriched cereals. Magnesium is found in bananas, pumpkin seeds, and, yum, dark chocolate. It's needed for a lot of important functions in the body, including proper nerve and muscle function, regulation of your blood sugar, and also it helps to maintain a normal blood pressure.

Vitamin K, which is important for normal blood clotting, is found in green leafy vegetables, blueberries, and turnips, among other foods. Calcium. Contrary to popular belief, calcium is not just found in dairy products. Plant based foods can also be an excellent source of calcium. Foods like kale, there's those green leafy vegetables again, broccoli, almonds, and hummus are especially high in calcium.

Another myth is that vegetarians have a higher rate of anemia than omnivores. Anemia is low iron levels. Iron. Promotes the healthy production of those red blood cells. And so, getting enough iron in your diet will prevent anemia. Heme iron comes from animals. It's found in their blood and muscles. And it is true that it is better absorbed and utilized than plant derived, non heme iron.

But you can easily meet or exceed your daily iron requirement with a whole food plant-based diet. And as a bonus, you get to avoid that increased risk of cancer, diabetes, and heart disease that's associated with a higher intake of meat and dairy. So good sources of non heme iron include beans, lentils, and you guessed it - leafy greens! Be sure to eat these foods with a side of vitamin C rich fruit to increase the absorption of the non heme iron. Last, sea vegetables like kelp and nori are excellent sources of iodine. Iodine is needed for thyroid health. In fact, these foods are so high in iodine that you can actually get too much, so don't overdo it.



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Weight loss. Whole food, plant-based diets can aid in maintaining a healthy weight. Research shows that individuals who follow a plant-based diet tend to have lower body mass indexes and an improved ratio of lean muscle mass to body fat. One of the reasons for this is the fiber content in plants. Fiber is only found in plants, it's not in animal-based foods.

And it really contributes to satiety, that feeling of fullness that helps you stop eating. So, this is going to reduce the likelihood that you overeat and it's going to minimize cravings for those unhealthy processed snacks. I mean, let's be honest, which one do you think you would overeat? container of ice cream or a bag of apples.

Let's not forget about the positive impact that plant-based diets have on the environment and animal welfare. I've touched on this a little bit before. So, the reduction of mass factory farming of animals for food will greatly reduce the amount of animals suffering on the planet. The production of meat requires excessive use of resources like water and land.

On the other hand, plant-based agriculture requires a lot less of those resources and produces much less greenhouse gas emissions. With increasing reliance on a plant-based diet, we can see a reduction in deforestation, and this is going to prevent the loss of those natural habitats. It will support biodiversity and the overall health of the ecosystems worldwide.

There is growing evidence for a link between plant-based diets and improved mental health and mood. So, the communication system between the gut and the brain is called the gut brain axis, and this is an information highway that is strongly influenced by the health of our gut microbiome. The microbiome is the population of microorganisms, mostly bacteria, that live in our large intestine.

And a diverse and healthy gut microbiome, which is supported by a plant-based diet, may contribute to the production of some mood boosting neurotransmitters like serotonin. On the other hand, those processed, highly processed foods, ultra-processed foods, high in added preservatives and refined sugars can damage our microbiome.

And this has been linked to an increased risk of mental health disorders. Additionally, plant-based foods like leafy greens, berries, nuts, things like that have a lot of antioxidants. Antioxidants fight off inflammation, they support brain function, and something called neuroplasticity. That's, neuroplasticity is how our brain and nervous system can adapt and change.

So, a diet rich in antioxidant foods is associated with enhanced cognitive abilities like improved memory and concentration and a reduction in the cognitive decline that is seen with aging. There's also research to support the role of a plant predominant diet in reducing the risk of diseases like Alzheimer's.



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A plant-based diet is associated with a reduced rate of a variety of inflammatory and autoimmune disorders. Again, going back to those antioxidants, we're going to see a reduction of inflammation in the body. And that's shown by a reduced level of something called a C reactive protein. C reactive protein, or CRP, is a marker of inflammation in the body.

And people who follow more of a plant predominant diet will have a lower CRP. CRP than people who eat more animal based or ultra-processed foods. A decrease in systemic inflammation in turn has positive effects on our overall health and well-being. For instance, people who follow a plant-based diet report less pain with fibromyalgia.

And people who suffer from chronic gastrointestinal disorders like irritable bowel syndrome and Crohn disease will have an improvement in symptoms. Irritable bowel syndrome is a common syndrome. It has, it's associated with abdominal pain, bloating, and either constipation or diarrhea, or maybe even both alternating.

Plant based diets, which are rich in fiber and low in processed foods, have shown promising results in preventing and managing the symptoms of irritable bowel syndrome. Now, I think based on the research that's available today, I would never claim that a plant-based diet is going to cure something like Crohn's disease, but it can provide relief by reducing the inflammation and promoting a healthy gut environment.

Rheumatoid arthritis is an autoimmune disease that's characterized by joint inflammation, pain, and stiffness and leads to a lot of disability. Plant based diets rich in these anti-inflammatory foods like berries can alleviate the symptoms of rheumatoid arthritis and improve joint mobility. People with RA report less pain and less stiffness when they follow a stricter plant-based diet.

In fact, many people with RA are able to reduce the number of the immune suppressing medications that they need when they switch over to a whole food plant-based diet. You can minimize your risk of certain cancers including, but not limited to, breast, prostate, and colorectal cancer if you follow more of a plant predominant diet.

A variety of cancer fighting compounds have been identified in plant-based foods and the greater the variety of plants you eat, the more of these compounds you're going to get. The fiber found in plants helps support a more diverse population of those beneficial gut bacteria, which in turn produce something called short chain fatty acids.

Short chain fatty acids do a lot of things in our body, and we're learning more and more every day about the importance of them, and one of the things that they do is reduce your risk of cancer. Recall from part one that processed meats like bacon, pepperoni, and hot dogs are actually strongly linked to colorectal cancer.



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In fact, the World Health Organization has identified them as class one carcinogens, and that means that the evidence indicating that processed meats cause cancer is as strong as the evidence that smoking causes lung cancer. Plant based diets have been shown to decrease the risk of developing type 2 diabetes.

So, insulin is a hormone that we make that takes sugar out of the blood and puts it into the cells where it's used for energy. And so that's how we regulate our blood sugar level. Uh, the amount of sugar in our blood needs to be within a very narrow range. Too little of it is dangerous and too much of it is dangerous.

It basically acts like a poison in our body and damages. Our organs, our blood vessels, and that's what the disease diabetes is. It's having too much sugar in our blood. We're not able to put it into the cells. In type two diabetes, the issue is with insulin resistance. We're actually making lots of insulin, but we can't use it properly.

Compare that to type one diabetes, which is where the cells that produce insulin are damaged, and you aren't making it at all. For type 2 diabetes, a plant-based diet, which is rich in fiber and low in saturated fats, can help improve your insulin sensitivity so that hormone can do its job better and help you regulate your blood sugar levels to keep them right where they need to be.

Alright, the number two reason to try to follow a plant-based diet is the reduced risk of heart disease. As I said earlier, heart disease is the leading cause of death in many countries around the world. High blood cholesterol levels are strongly associated with it. The cholesterol gets deposited in the arteries that supply blood to the heart, and then when those arteries get clogged off, you have a heart attack.

Cholesterol is only found in animals, it's not in plants. The other thing that you find more of in animals is that unhealthy saturated fat. Saturated fat is most abundant in meat. It is also found in palm oil and coconut oil, and it plays a big role in raising our cholesterol levels and therefore increasing the risk of heart disease.

Plants naturally have zero cholesterol, and most of them are low in saturated fat, making them the healthier choice. Also, the fiber in plants acts in a number of ways to keep our cholesterol levels down, further reducing the risk of heart disease. Whole plant-based foods have less sodium or salt than processed and animal-based foods, and lower sodium intake helps decrease your blood pressure and promotes better heart health.

So, even if you have a strong family history of heart disease, if you eliminate those unhealthy ultra-processed foods from your diet and reduce or eliminate animal, high fat animal-based foods sticking to more of a whole food, plant predominant diet, you can drop your risk of heart disease in many cases almost to zero.



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Alright, the number one reason that a plant-based diet is better for you is fiber, that fabulous fiber. You may have noticed that in the top nine benefits of a plant-based diet, almost all of them mentioned the role that fiber plays. It's only found in plants, you can't get it from meat or dairy, and it is so important for our overall health.

In fact, I'm going to dedicate an entire episode just to talking about the importance of fiber. So, for now, I'll just list a couple of those benefits to keep it short. So, to recap, fiber plays a role in maintaining a healthy weight, it lowers your risk of colon and other types of cancer, it prevents heart disease and other vascular diseases like stroke, and hey, you know what I didn't mention?

Erectile dysfunction. That is also a vascular disease. It does all of this by reducing blood cholesterol levels and supporting a healthy gut microbiome. I think I already mentioned that there will also be an entire episode microbiome. An additional benefit is that dietary fiber prevents constipation. I mean, it's not called nature's broom for nothing.

Alright, we talked about what a whole food plant-based diet is, and we covered why you should try to eat more plants. Now, let's just spend a few more minutes talking about the how, how to change your diet. You know, habit change is hard. We're used to eating certain foods, and we know we need to do better, but how do we do that?

How do we break away from what we're used to eating and move to a healthier model? So, the, you know, the number one thing to do is going to be, take it slow, just gradually introduce more plant-based meals into your routine. Consider doing something like a meatless Monday where one day out of the week you only eat plant-based foods.

You might try bringing a healthy plant-based lunch with you to work, and that will help you avoid going to the fast-food restaurant for those unhealthy ultra-processed foods. Another thing you can do is try replacing the meat in your favorite recipes with a plant-based alternative like beans or tofu.

This gradual approach is going to allow you to stick with foods that are familiar to you and will ensure more of a smooth transition. People who want to remain omnivores can still follow a plant predominant diet where most of the food comes from plants, and the meat is just eaten in smaller portions.

I do still recommend avoiding ultra-processed foods to the extent possible, but if you consider a typical Western meal, the main course is centered around meat, fish, or eggs, right? The plant-based ingredients are going to be on the side, the little, you know, side of corn or mashed potatoes, the beans in your chili, pico de gallo on your taco, things like that.

But the animal protein is generally the star of the show. So out of curiosity, I checked out the menu for a local mid-priced steakhouse here in town. And the largest cut of



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meat offered on their menu was a 23-ounce steak. And the smallest was nine ounces. They had a featured item, which was a 20-ounce bone in ribeye, and it had this little, tiny bowl of green beans with some bacon bits on the side.

So just for reference, a serving of meat, what's considered one serving of meat, is actually only three ounces. That's about the size of a deck of playing cards. So, their smallest, the smallest cut of meat on their menu was equivalent to three servings. And that bone in ribeye that they were promoting was almost seven servings of meat in a single meal.

And that little bowl of green beans featured on the side was approximately a fourth of a serving. So, when we're talking about moving more to a plant predominant style of eating, we want to flip the plate, so to speak. We're going to change it so that rather than having a huge serving of animal-based foods, we're going to feature the plant-based foods as the main portion, and then that animal protein is going to be used, say, to flavor the food instead of being the main component of the food.

Examples are going to be things like a stir fry with rice and lots of different vegetables, and just a little chicken or shrimp for flavor. Or you might consider having a salad with a little bit of cheese or a sliced boiled egg on top. You can make something like a hearty vegetable stew and use chicken broth as the base.

The more often you can replace the animal-based food with the plant-based option, the greater the benefits will be to your health. So even if you don't want to give up on your animal-based foods altogether, at least try switching the proportions around so you get the greater benefit. When I'm in the office and I talk to my families about making healthy changes, I don't expect them to go full vegan.

I mean, let's, you know, to be honest, that is the gold standard, right? If I had to pick one diet that I think everybody should eat, it would be 100 percent plant based, hands down. But I recognize that that's not realistic for everybody. So, what I tell my families in the office is that Any movement towards a plant-based diet that you can make will improve your health.

You will get the benefits from it. So, start small, start, start with small steps, and work your way up. I always advocate for making the changes that you can make. I want to support my patients and families. in achieving their health goals in a way that is accessible, that is in alignment with their unique culture and history.

And I want them to enjoy the process. So how did our virtual checkup go? In part one, we took the diet history to see what folks in the U. S. and similar countries are eating. Too many fast, convenient, ultra-processed foods and not enough fruits, vegetables, or grains. Then we explored the symptoms resulting from our poor dietary habits, increased rates of cardiovascular disease, diabetes, obesity, mood disorders, chronic



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inflammatory diseases, as well as the impact that we're having on our planet in the form of loss of natural habitats and rapidly worsening climate change.

Then, in part two, we talked about the treatment plan, specifically to increase the consumption of whole plant-based foods and reduce our reliance on meat, dairy, and especially ultra-processed foods as much as possible. I hope that you benefited from these episodes and learned at least a little bit. And I hope that you'll continue to join me on this journey to discover how we can all benefit from a healthier lifestyle that includes more plant-based foods.

Thanks for listening to this episode of Eat Your Greens with Dr. Black. Parenting is a journey that comes with many challenges, but also much joy. I hope this podcast empowers you to set your family on the path to lifelong health. If you enjoyed this podcast, please hit the subscribe button so you never miss an episode.

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