

Nutrition Notes: Eating for the Health of the Earth and Future Generations

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What would our diets look like if we considered not just our own nourishment and health, but also the health of the Earth and our future generations? For me, this question is central to the theme of this year's National Nutrition Month®: *"Fuel for the Future."* Since 1973, the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics has been creating an annual campaign during the month of March to raise awareness of dietary and lifestyle choices that support health. For March 2023, our focus is on the role of food and nutrition in supporting planetary health.

Indigenous cultures around the world have long recognized the interconnectedness of life and therefore have understood that human health depends on the health of everything around us. The practice of respecting and caring for the land, water, plants, animals, birds, insects, and other creatures not only supports life around us, but is essential for our human survival

and well-being now and into the future. The concept of reciprocity or exchanging and sharing for mutual benefit, is central to indigenous foodways: If we live lightly on Earth—grow, gather, hunt, harvest, and eat only what is needed—and give back nourishment for life to regenerate around us, Earth will continue to provide us with food, and we'll have a greater opportunity to live in good health.

However, what we see happening is a deterioration of the Earth and human health. The UN Environment Programme estimates that we are using about 1.6 Earths to maintain our current way of life; one million species of plants and animals are threatened with extinction; 90% of marine fish stocks are exploited or depleted; 75% of Earth's land surface has been significantly altered, with 24 billion tons of fertile soil being lost every year mostly because of agricultural practices. At the same time, diet-related diseases such as diabetes and cardiovascular disease continue to be on the rise, with more than a million Americans dying from these diseases each year.

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This begs us to reflect on how our ways of living are contributing to the devastation and how food fits into this picture.

The global food system, which is everything from the way food is grown and processed, to how food is transported, marketed, and consumed, is considered a main driver of environmental degradation. The food system is responsible for more than 25% of greenhouse gas emissions, using 70% of freshwater and 40% of land surfaces, polluting the waters, and causing the rapid loss of biodiversity (the important variety of life that supports the Earth's adaptability and vitality). Simply put, the systems that we depend on to feed us are not sustaining and regenerating life on Earth, but rather are causing destruction.

What can we do to shift this situation and support a healthier planet and healthier humans? In 2019, a group of 37

scientists from 16 countries formed the EAT-Lancet Commission to look more closely at the environmental imprint of the foods we eat. In their report, they claim that *"Food is the single strongest lever to optimize human health and environmental sustainability on Earth."* A highlight of their findings was that diets that are good for the planet are also good for our health. The scientists promoted the "planetary health diet" as a solution—a nutritious diet that would allow Earth to survive and humans to be healthy. The diet is based on plant foods, including a variety of whole grains, fruits, vegetables, nuts, and legumes. Small portions of animal and dairy foods are allowed. The diet also has some flexibility depending on local geography, individual nutrient needs, and cultural and personal preferences. For some parts of the world, following this diet would involve increasing access to certain foods while in other parts, people would need to eat less of certain foods. For example, many people in the U.S. would need to eat a lot more vegetables, fruits, nuts, and legumes; and a lot less red meat, soda, sugar, fats, and highly processed foods.

What parts of your diet are you willing to change to support the health of the Earth? If you are a big meat eater, try substituting meat in your meals with plant-based protein foods like beans and lentils; doing this one meal a week can be a good starting point. You can also plan ahead and dedicate one day a week as "meatless day" and explore new vegetarian recipes. Perhaps you'll like these meals so much that you'll want to add more meatless days to your week. If you are a regular soda drinker, try adding a "soda-free day" to your week, and/or switching out soda for water or herbal tea made from locally harvested herbs. Stuck on chips, pretzels, popcorn, cookies, and other packaged snack foods? Again, start with small steps and dedicate one day a week to consuming nothing processed from a package. Swap out these snacks with some seasonal vegetables, fruits, and nuts instead. Taking these small steps can lead you gradually to eating a diet that is more aligned with the "planetary health diet." You will likely feel your health improve too.

While it may feel daunting to tackle the environmental problems we face, recognize that your individual actions make a difference. What we need is not just a quick, band-aid solution to the problem, but a commitment to the long-term work of caring for the planet and creating a healthy place for future generations to thrive.

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