Worldwide, an estimated two billion people live primarily on a meat-based diet, while an estimated four billion live primarily on a plant-based diet. According to a 2016 poll from The Vegetarian Resource Group, around 3.3 percent of American adults in the United States are vegetarian or vegan. However, more people who consider themselves to be omnivores are adopting a more plant-based diet - even on a temporary basis for many reasons including health, religious beliefs or just as a challenge.

If you are considering a plant-based diet, the foods included in your diet can vary depending on your own preferences. A plant-based diet usually excludes meats, poultry, fish, etc. and includes foods that contain the ingredients listed below.

**Foods that Can be Eaten on a Plant-Based Diet**

- Fruits
- Vegetables
- Grains
- Nuts
- Seeds
- And legumes are usually the basis of the diet.

Dairy products such as eggs, milk, cheese or soy products such as tofu and tempeh or “meat alternatives” can also be added at your discretion. Note: Some people choose to exclude honey and gelatin when on a plant-based diet.

**Potential Health Benefits**

Many people cite the primary reason for adopting a plant-based diet as to improve health and to prevent or treat a disease.

Numerous scientific studies have investigated the health outcomes of plant-based diets. In 2006, a review of 87 studies revealed that patients on a plant-based diet have lower rates of heart disease, Type 2 diabetes, hypertension and obesity. In addition, these studies found that those on a vegan diet (no animal products including dairy) burned more calories after a meal than non-vegan counterparts.
**Improved Glucose Control and Decreased Risk of Heart Disease**

Other studies demonstrated vast improvements in glucose control with a plant-based diet. A study involving more than 60,000 men and women discovered that those who included meat in their diet were 74 percent more likely to develop Type 2 diabetes than those on a plant-based diet! This type of diet can also be used to control diabetes when used in conjunction with low glycemic protocols.

A study published in *Public Health Nutrition* in 1998 reviewed data in those with and without animal products in their diet, and the plant-based diet group was found to have a 24 percent reduction in death rates due to heart attacks. Evidence also shows an 18 percent reduction in overall cancer for those on a plant-based diet.

“People who adopt vegetarian diets have lower body mass indexes (BMIs), better control of blood pressure and blood glucose, less inflammation and lower cholesterol levels compared with non-vegetarians,” notes Vandana Sheth, a spokesperson for the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics.

**Achieving Weight-loss**

This may all sound great, but keep in mind that a plant-based diet does not always lead to weight-loss. This (and any other) diet should still create a calorie deficit from the baseline needs of the dieter, and ideally be paired with regular physical activity if the goal is to decrease one’s body weight. Simply eliminating meats and fish from the diet may not lead to weight-loss if these foods are replaced with processed foods, refined sugars or high-calorie, high-density foods. Careful planning is needed to be sure the plant-based dieter knows what healthy options he or she has, especially when on-the-go or when the dieter is not in charge of the meal preparation.

Furthermore, registered dietitians can help people who want to follow a plant-based eating plan in any life stage to make well-informed choices to achieve these benefits.

**Potential Health Risks**

When a diet is limited to plants, the dieter may become concerned about missing out on vital nutrients.

**Protein**

A well balanced, plant-based diet should include protein sources such as chickpeas, soybeans and quinoa.

**Iron**

While iron is found in non-meat sources, it is not as bioavailable as the iron found in animal sources. It is important to include foods rich in iron such as kidney beans, black beans, spinach, raisins, cashews, oatmeal, cabbage and tomato juice. Surprisingly, however, iron deficiency anemia is rare in those on a plant-based diet.

**Fatty acids**

These components are essential for neurological and other body functions. People on a plant-based diet are more likely to be deficient in omega 3 fats. These can be supplemented or found in natural sources such as flaxseed, walnuts or canola oil.
When eating a plant-based diet, it is essential to use a variety of plants, grains and legumes to decrease the likelihood of vitamin and nutrient deficits. Some people on plant-based diets may need to supplement vitamin B12, iron or zinc. Having these and other vitamin levels measured at the start of a new diet and periodically along the way can make each individual aware of their supplementation needs.

Finally, I must disclose that as a vegetarian for more than 25 years and as an obesity medicine physician, I do not usually recommend that my patients adopt a vegetarian diet solely for the purpose of losing weight – even though the evidence that it is beneficial clearly exists.

The decision to adopt a plant-based diet should be based on the individual’s own food preferences, morals and desires. The careful planning that goes into adopting a healthy plant-based diet should be considered prior to starting such a diet to avoid the potential for nutritional deficiencies. Consider consulting with a registered dietician when starting a plant-based diet to get meal and snack ideas that suit your own likes, dislikes and comfort level with cooking. Adopting a plant-based diet is an excellent opportunity to revisit some foods that one has not tasted since childhood, to test out unique foods, to experiment with new meal preparation techniques and be healthy at any stage of your weight-management journey.

Resources:
www.nutritionstudies.org/whole-food-plant-based-diet-guide/
www.vrg.org/nutshell/Polls/2016_adults_veg.htm

About the Author:
Holly F. Lofton, MD, is an assistant professor of medicine and surgery at NYU School of Medicine. She treats adults affected by excess weight and obesity and designed the popular New You weight-loss program for those who have not been able to achieve weight-loss with conventional methods. She is also a past member of the OAC National Board of Directors.