

# SHAPE

## Why You Should Seriously Consider Following a Flexitarian Diet

If you're a semi-vegetarian who just can't break up with meat for good—the flexitarian diet plan is perfect for you.

By Moira Lawler January 19, 2017

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Maybe you're a vegetarian who *craves* a burger every now and then (and don't want to get shade for "cheating"). Or you're a straight-up carnivore looking to lighten up on your meat-eating ways for health reasons. (After all, [vegetarians live 3.5 years longer than meat eaters.](#)) Well, good news, there's an eating plan for you. It's called the flexitarian diet plan, a buzzy way of eating that Dawn Jackson Blatner outlined in her book *The Flexitarian Diet*. (Jackson Blatner also put together the 30-Day Shape Up Your Plate Healthy Eating Meal Plan.) Don't let the word "diet" throw you off—flexitarianism is more an overall way of eating/lifestyle, and no, it's not difficult to maintain...hence the flex for flexible.

Essentially, it means you're a flexible vegetarian. You eat tofu, quinoa, tons of produce, and other vegetarian favorites, but you're also allowed to occasionally eat meat and fish. Sounds straightforward enough, right? Here, dive into the details including the pros and cons of this way of eating.

### **So, just how much meat are you allowed to eat?**

True to its name, the diet is flexible, but there are some guidelines about how much meat you should eat. According to Blatner's book, brand-new flexitarians should forgo meat two days a week and divvy up 26 ounces of meat over the remaining five days (for reference, a card-deck-sized portion of meat is about 3 ounces, while a restaurant-sized piece is around 5, says [Pam Nisevich Bede](#), a dietitian with Abbott's EAS Sports Nutrition). The next tier (advanced flexitarians) follow a vegetarian diet three or four days a week and consume no more than 18 ounces of meat over the remaining days. Finally, an expert-level flexitarian is allowed 9 ounces of meat two days a week and goes meat-free the other five.

Following a flexitarian diet plan isn't as much about slashing meat consumption as it is about prioritizing veggie-rich dishes. Grains, nuts, dairy, eggs, beans, and produce have a place in the diet, but processed foods and sweets should be avoided. "It's more than cutting down on the meat, it's cutting down on the processed food," says Laura Cipullo, R.D., of [Laura Cipullo Whole Nutrition in New York](#).

## Benefits of following a flexitarian diet

All of the plus sides to being a vegetarian carry over to this diet. There's the environmental aspect since cutting down on your meat and fish intake lightens your carbon footprint, and the many health perks. Following a vegetarian diet has been shown to lower your risk of high blood pressure, cardiovascular disease, and stroke, and vegetarians tend to have lower BMIs than meat eaters, according to this [Polish study](#). Plus, since you'll still be eating some meat, you won't have to worry quite as much about getting a sufficient amount of protein and nutrients like B vitamins and iron. (That's also a [strength of the pescatarian diet](#).)

The other major advantage is the diet's straightforwardness and flexibility. "I love the flexitarian diet because it doesn't necessarily pigeon hole you into one way of eating or another," says Bede. "We know that certain diets like vegetarian or vegan sometimes get to be a little bit too restrictive, and the more flexibility that you can introduce while still staying on a regimen is a good thing." (Check out [the most commonly deficient nutrients for vegetarians and vegans](#).)

Those who are used to counting calories religiously might find the flexibility frustrating, but for everyone else, the open-ended nature may make the flexitarian diet easier to stick to since you're less likely to feel deprived. Thanksgiving turkey or barbecue on your trip to Austin? Both are fair game here.

Finally, filling your shopping cart with plant-based proteins, like soy, lentils, and beans, could also help you save some money on your grocery bill, too, says Bede.

## Downsides to Eating Less Meat

If you're a big-time carnivore, changing your ways can be tough, especially if you just can't feel satisfied after a meatless meal. "You'll get hungry and then start eating tons of carbs and nuts to get the protein you need, so you may take in more calories than you would if you just took in more animal protein," says Cipullo. To combat those constant hungry feelings, active women

should aim for 30 grams of protein at each meal, says Bede. That's pretty simple for meat eaters, but flexitarians will need to be more strategic and look for protein to come from plant-based sources. "If you're just eating a spinach salad, there's no way you're going to hit it, but if you throw in some lentils, tofu, or a protein shake, you can absolutely get to that target," says Bede.

You'll also have to pay closer attention to your levels of B12, vitamin D, iron, and calcium. Look for dairy or nut milks fortified with calcium and vitamin D, says Cipullo. And if you're already dealing with an iron deficiency, stick to just two or three days a week eating vegetarian rather than pushing it to five, she says.

### **The Bottom Line**

Vegetarians and vegans may view flexitarians as cop-outs who are trying to have their cake and eat it too. But setting out to eat more vegetable-heavy meals rather than refined and processed foods can have a big positive impact on your health. So should you go for it? Both Bede and Cipullo say absolutely. "This is a diet we can all embrace and think about, if nothing else to introduce new variety," says Bede. Even just giving up meat for one meal or one day is a step in the right nutritional direction. (Start with these [15 vegetarian recipes even meat-eaters will love.](#))