



WHAT IS A “WHOLE FOODS” DIET?

Whole foods throughout the whole day!

When I first started eating a plant-based diet, I heard the term “whole foods” a lot, and that a whole foods diet is very health-promoting. But I felt a little silly that I didn’t know what “whole foods” meant, exactly.

I soon learned that it didn’t mean I had to eat my food whole, or that I could only eat food from Whole Foods Market; it means eating food that still looks as it did growing in nature, or very close to it. Basically, food that has not been messed with, or only minimally messed with. This is because everything (all the nutrients and fiber) in that whole fruit, vegetable, grain, legume (beans, peas, lentils), nut or seed has already been perfectly arranged: as the saying goes, “Don’t mess with Mother Nature.”

The human body runs most efficiently on food that is in its natural form, or very close to it. When the body sees an oily, salty potato chip comin’ down the chute, it has to work harder to do its job. If we make the body’s job easier, it will make our life easier.

When I say “messed with” I am referring to food that has been overly altered during food manufacturing. This is typically done through the processing and refining of food. Sugar, salt, and oil (as well as other chemicals and preservatives) are often added in with whole foods during processing, while other things may be removed, such as all-important fiber and water (which is why we don’t fill up as easily on processed foods and often develop constipation).

There are many reasons manufacturers process food, but mainly it’s to concentrate flavors, thereby making the product more appealing to our taste buds, so we’ll continue buying it, and the manufacturer will continue to make nice profits. Processing and packaging foods can also result in a product that lasts longer on the shelf, and is convenient to eat. But beware, as these foods are typically very high in calories.

However, all processing needn’t be avoided: we process whole foods ourselves when we make applesauce from apples, carrot juice from carrots, a green smoothie from fruit and kale, and pancakes using oat flour we ground from rolled oats. These things have been minimally processed. The upside to this is that *you* made it so you know what’s in it (and not in it), and you know the quality of the whole food (how fresh it is, if it’s organic and GMO-free) and any ingredients that went into it. However, minimally processing our own foods can also result in a calorie-dense final result, such as with pancakes and smoothies.

You can also find minimally processed packaged foods at the store, such as: cooked whole foods (beans, tomatoes, vegetables); frozen fruits and vegetables; and non-dairy milks and condiments (salsa, mustard, vinegar). The best choices will be those that do not contain any salt, sugar, and oil. Below is an excellent list of the 10 healthiest packaged foods you can buy.

Processed food products that are best to avoid (or go light on) are those that have been overly manipulated and are full of salt, sugar and oil, such as: potato chips and crackers, snack bars and candy, prepared soups and frozen dinners/desserts, most boxed cereals and breads, jarred spaghetti and pizza sauces, and yogurts and other refrigerated prepared foods and condiments. Fast and slow food restaurants also add a lot of salt, sugar and oil to their food.

Unless you're dealing with a whole fruit, vegetable, grain, legume, nut or seed, check out the ingredient list on the package so you know what you're putting into your body, and that you're okay with it given your health goals.

In your quest to eat more whole foods, keep the following in mind:

Sooner is better: As soon as a plant is plucked from its life-source (the soil, the tree branch) it begins to deteriorate. Eating whole fruits and vegetables within a day or so of picking them or buying them will yield the most nutritional benefits. Frozen whole fruits and vegetables can also be a nutritious choice, as they are flash-frozen very soon after picking.

Where to look: Local farmers markets and farm stands are ideal places to find an abundance of nutritious whole foods since the food has usually been picked within 24 hours. Your grocer's produce section also carries whole foods, although this food will typically not be as fresh as what you'll find at farmers markets, since the food has often been trucked in from afar. Search online for "farmers markets," "produce stands," and "CSAs" (community supported agriculture) to locate the freshest local produce.

Whole on the go: Whole foods travel easily and fill us up. Consider packing a snack bag to take with you when you leave for work or go on a trip. Convenient whole food choices include: bananas, apples, grapes, carrots, fresh green pea pods, and cold cooked potatoes. Dried fruits and nuts are often handy whole food choices for traveling, but they are more calorie-dense. Cooked oatmeal or leftovers, even if cold, also make delicious traveling food.

Viva la variety: Consume a variety of whole foods throughout the day to adequately meet your body's nutrient needs. I usually start my morning with a bowl of cut-up fruit and/or cooked whole-grains (brown rice, quinoa, etc.) with almond or soy milk. My lunch might include a green salad with a variety of veggies and beans, or a bowl of hearty vegetable soup. Later in the day, I'll grab a couple pieces of fruit, and for dinner I might have baked potatoes or winter squash topped with raw and/or cooked vegetables, or a hearty chili.

For optimum health, whole is the goal!

-Cathy Fisher, Chef

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