

Research examines 700 plant-based foods to see how healthy they really are

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Vegetarian burger. Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

If you're thinking about buying plant-based foods, a trip to the supermarket can leave you bewildered.

There are plant-based burgers, sausages and mince. The fridges are loaded with non-dairy milk, cheese and yogurt. Then there are the tins of beans and packets of [tofu](#).

But how much is actually healthy?

Our nutritional audit of more than 700 plant-based foods for sale in Australian supermarkets has just been [published](#). We found some products are so high in salt or saturated fat, we'd struggle to call them "healthy."

We took (several) trips to the supermarket

In 2022, we visited two of each of four major supermarket retailers across Melbourne to collect information on the available range of plant-based alternatives to [meat](#) and [dairy products](#).

We took pictures of the products and their nutrition labels.

We then analyzed the nutrition information on the packaging of more than 700 of these products. This included 236 meat substitutes, 169 legumes and pulses, 50 baked beans, 157 dairy milk substitutes, 52 cheese substitutes and 40 non-dairy yogurts.

Plant-based meats were surprisingly salty

We found a wide range of plant-based meats for sale. So, it's not surprising we found large variations in their nutrition content.

Sodium, found in added salt and which contributes to [high blood pressure](#), was our greatest concern.

The sodium content varied from 1 milligram per 100 grams in products such as tofu, to 2,000mg per 100g in items such as plant-based mince products.

This means we could eat our entire [daily recommended sodium intake](#) in just one bowl of plant-based mince.

An [audit](#) of 66 plant-based meat products in Australian supermarkets conducted in 2014 found sodium ranged from 316mg in legume-based products to 640mg in tofu products, per 100g. In a [2019 audit](#) of 137 products, the range was up to 1,200mg per 100g.

In other words, the results of our audit seems to show a consistent trend of plant-based meats [getting saltier](#).

What about plant-based milks?

Some 70% of the plant-based milks we audited were fortified with [calcium](#), a nutrient important for [bone health](#).

This is good news as a [2019–2020 audit](#) of 115 plant-based milks from Melbourne and Sydney found only 43% of plant-based milks were fortified with calcium.

Of the fortified milks in our audit, almost three-quarters (73%) contained the [recommended amount of calcium](#)—at least 100mg per 100mL.

We also looked at the saturated fat content of plant-based milks.

Coconut-based milks had on average up to six times higher saturated fat content than almond, oat or soy milks.

[Previous audits](#) also found coconut-based milks were much higher in saturated fat than all other categories of milks.

A first look at cheese and yogurt alternatives

Our audit is the first study to identify the range of cheese and yogurt alternatives available in Australian supermarkets.

Calcium was only labeled on a third of plant-based yogurts, and only 20% of supermarket options met the recommended 100mg of calcium per 100g.

For plant-based cheeses, most (92%) were not fortified with calcium. Their [sodium content](#) varied from 390mg to 1,400mg per 100g, and saturated fat ranged from 0g to 28g per 100g.

So, what should we consider when shopping?

As a general principle, try to choose whole plant foods, such as unprocessed legumes, beans or tofu. These foods are packed with vitamins and minerals. They're also high in dietary fiber, which is good for your gut health and keeps you fuller for longer.

If opting for a processed plant-based food, here are five tips for choosing a healthier option.

1. Watch the sodium

Plant-based meat alternatives can be high in sodium, so look for products that have [around](#) 150–250mg sodium per 100g.

2. Pick canned beans and legumes

Canned chickpeas, lentils and beans can be healthy and low-cost [additions to many meals](#). Where you can, choose canned varieties with no added salt, especially when buying baked beans.

3. Add herbs and spices to your tofu

Tofu can be a great alternative to meat. Check the label and pick the option with the highest calcium content. We found flavored tofu was higher in salt and [sugar content](#) than minimally processed tofu. So it's best to pick an unflavored option and add your own flavors with spices and herbs.

4. Check the calcium

When choosing a non-dairy alternative to milk, such as those made from soy, oat, or rice, check it is fortified with calcium. A good alternative to traditional dairy will have at least 100mg of calcium per 100g.

5. Watch for saturated fat

If looking for a lower saturated fat option, almond, soy, rice and oat varieties of milk and yogurt alternatives have much lower saturated fat content than coconut options. Pick those with less than 3g per 100g.

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