

## Smokers, former smokers may gain from switch to plant-based diet

April 29 2024, by Dennis Thompson

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Current and former smokers might lower their risk for emphysema if

they adopt a highly nutritional plant-based diet, a new study shows.

People with a history of smoking who adopted a [plant-based diet](#) had a 56% lower risk of developing [emphysema](#), compared to those who ate more meat, researchers report.

Further, the more veggies and fruits people included in their diet, the lower their risk of emphysema.

"Identifying these modifiable factors, such as diet, is vital for helping reduce the risk of developing [chronic lung disease](#) in those with a history of smoking," said lead researcher Mariah Jackson, a registered dietitian nutritionist and assistant professor with the University of Nebraska Medical Center.

These findings jibe with earlier studies that "show an association between an individual's dietary choices and lung health, including reducing wheezing in children and lowering asthma occurrence in children and adults," Jackson added.

For the study, researchers followed more than 1,700 participants in a long-term heart health study, all of whom were recruited between the ages of 18 and 30 and followed for three decades.

They all were current or former smokers by year 20 of the study, and had filled out questionnaires tracking their diet history and quality.

More than 1,300 of those participants had a CT scan at year 25 of the study to see whether they'd developed emphysema, among other health problems.

Emphysema, a type of [COPD](#), occurs due to irreversible damage to the air sacs in the lungs, which limits the amount of oxygen that these sacs

can transfer to the bloodstream. People are left feeling constantly short of breath.

Results show risk of emphysema dropped 34% for each one-unit increase in participants plant-based diet score. In other words, the risk declined as they ate more plant-based foods.

The findings, published recently in [Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Diseases: Journal of the COPD Foundation](#), shows that a healthy diet can help smokers, even those who struggle to quit, Jackson said.

"We know long-term smoking cessation adherence can be challenging, requiring complementary treatments, like a nutrient-rich, plant-centered [diet](#), to help preserve lung health," Jackson said in a journal news release.

"More research is needed on when dietary choices have the most potential to impact lung health, which can then inform public health guidelines and dietary recommendations, especially in children and young adults," Jackson added.

**More information:** Mariah K. Jackson et al, A Plant-Centered Diet is Inversely Associated With Radiographic Emphysema: Findings from the CARDIA Lung Study, *Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Diseases: Journal of the COPD Foundation* (2023). [DOI: 10.15326/jcopdf.2023.0437](https://doi.org/10.15326/jcopdf.2023.0437)

Harvard Medical School has more on [emphysema](#).

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