

Two decades of studies suggest health benefits associated with plant-based diets, but caution urged

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Vegetarian and vegan diets are generally associated with better status on various medical factors linked to cardiovascular health and cancer risk, as well as lower

risk of cardiovascular diseases, cancer, and death. Credit: Nature Zen, Unsplash, CC0 (creativecommons.org/publicdomain/zero/1.0/)

Vegetarian and vegan diets are generally associated with better status on various medical factors linked to cardiovascular health and cancer risk, as well as lower risk of cardiovascular diseases, cancer, and death, according to a new review of 48 previously published papers. Angelo Capodici and colleagues present these findings in the open-access journal *PLOS ONE* on May 15, 2024.

Prior studies have linked certain diets with increased risk of [cardiovascular disease](#) and cancer. A diet that is poor in plant products and rich in meat, refined grains, sugar, and salt is associated with higher risk of death. Reducing consumption of animal-based products in favor of plant-based products has been suggested to lower the risk of cardiovascular disease and cancer. However, the overall benefits of such diets remain unclear.

To deepen an understanding of the potential benefits of plant-based diets, Capodici and colleagues reviewed 48 papers published between January 2000 and June 2023 that had compiled evidence from multiple prior studies. Following an "umbrella" review approach, they extracted and analyzed data from the 48 papers on links between plant-based diets, [cardiovascular health](#), and cancer risk.

Their analysis showed that, overall, vegetarian and vegan diets have a robust statistical association with better health status on a number of risk factors associated with cardiometabolic diseases, cancer, and mortality, such as [blood pressure](#), management of blood sugar, and body mass index. Such diets are associated with reduced risk of ischemic heart disease, gastrointestinal and [prostate cancer](#), and death from

cardiovascular disease.

However, among [pregnant women](#) specifically, those with [vegetarian diets](#) faced no difference in their risk of gestational diabetes and hypertension compared to those on non-plant-based diets.

Overall, these findings suggest that plant-based diets are associated with significant health benefits. However, the researchers note, the statistical strength of this association is significantly limited by the many differences between past studies in terms of the specific diet regimens followed, patient demographics, study duration, and other factors.

Moreover, some plant-based diets may introduce vitamin and mineral deficiencies for some people. Thus, the researchers caution against large-scale recommendation of plant-based diets until more research is completed.

The authors add, "Our study evaluates the different impacts of animal-free diets for cardiovascular health and [cancer risk](#) showing how a vegetarian diet can be beneficial to human health and be one of the effective preventive strategies for the two most impactful chronic diseases on human health in the 21st century."

More information: Cardiovascular health and cancer risk associated with plant based diets: An umbrella review, *PLOS ONE* (2024). [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0300711](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0300711)

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