

# Review shows plant-based diets benefit athletes' heart health, endurance, recovery

10 January 2019



Credit: CC0 Public Domain

Meat-free athletes—from tennis champion Venus Williams to Formula 1's Lewis Hamilton to Derrick Morgan of the NFL's Tennessee Titans—have already proven the performance-boosting power of a plant-based diet. Now, "Plant-Based Diets for Cardiovascular Safety and Performance in Endurance Sports," a new scientific review published in the journal *Nutrients* adds further evidence that plant-based athletes benefit from improvements in heart health, performance, and recovery.

"It's no wonder that more and more athletes are racing to a [vegan diet](#)," says review co-author James Loomis, M.D., M.B.A., medical director for the Barnard Medical Center. "Whether you're training for a couch-to-5K or an Ironman Triathlon, a plant-based [diet](#) is a powerful tool for improving athletic performance and recovery." Dr. Loomis, who is currently training for an Ironman Triathlon, is also featured in *The Game Changers*, a documentary on vegan athletes scheduled to be released in 2019. He also served as team internist for the St. Louis Rams and the St. Louis Cardinals.

Plant-based diets play a key role in cardiovascular health, which is critical for [endurance](#) athletes. But the review finds that even well-trained athletes are at risk for heart disease. A 2017 study found that 44 percent of middle-aged and older endurance cyclists or runners had coronary plaques. A low-fat, vegetarian diet is the most effective dietary pattern clinically shown to reverse plaque. A plant-based diet also addresses other key contributors to atherosclerosis, including dyslipidemia, elevated blood pressure, elevated body weight, and diabetes.

Because a plant-based diet is typically high in carbohydrates, it may also offer performance advantages. Carbohydrates are the primary energy source during [aerobic exercise](#), and endurance is enhanced by a high-carbohydrate intake. But a 2016 study of Ironman triathletes found that fewer than half reported meeting the recommended carbohydrate intake for athletes training 1-3 hours per day.

The researchers also find that a plant-based diet boosts athletic performance and recovery by increasing blood flow and tissue oxygenation and reducing oxidative stress and inflammation. A varied diet of fruits, vegetables, grains, and legumes, along with a vitamin B12 supplement, provides all of the necessary nutrients an endurance athlete needs, including protein, calcium, and iron.

"Like any endurance [athlete](#), plant-based athletes just need more calories than less active people," says review co-author Susan Levin, M.S., R.D., C.S.S.D., a board certified specialist in sports dietetics and director of nutrition education for the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine. "And if they are eating a wide variety of nutrient-dense fruits, vegetables, grains, and beans, they will easily meet all of their nutritional needs."

**More information:** *Nutrients*, [DOI](#):

[10.3390/nu11010](#)

Provided by Physicians Committee for  
Responsible Medicine

APA citation: Review shows plant-based diets benefit athletes' heart health, endurance, recovery (2019, January 10) retrieved 5 December 2021 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2019-01-plant-based-diets-benefit-athletes-heart.html>

*This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.*