

How health care professionals (HCPs) can advise on a heart-healthy diet and help fight the climate crisis

A recent American Heart Association (AHA) scientific statement¹ outlines the key principles of a heart-healthy dietary pattern as a tool for HCPs to empower patients. The paper focuses on several well-known dietary patterns, including the Mediterranean, DASH (Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension), vegetarian/vegan, and plant-based diets. It analyses each pattern's adherence to the AHA's dietary guidelines, which emphasise the consumption of fruits, vegetables, legumes, whole grains, lean proteins, and limited saturated and trans fats.

Mediterranean, DASH, vegetarian/vegan, and plant-based diets are good for cardiovascular health.

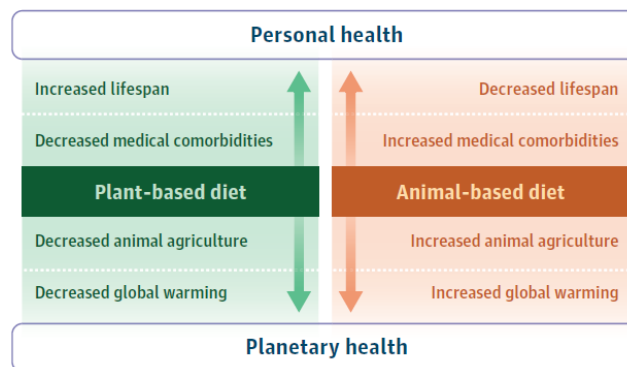
The findings indicate that the Mediterranean and DASH diets align well with the AHA guidelines and have demonstrated positive effects on cardiovascular health. These patterns emphasize whole foods, promote a balanced intake of nutrients, and have been associated with reduced risks of cardiovascular disease (CVD). In addition, they contained flexibility to reflect personal and cultural preferences, as well as affordability and accessibility, which are important for long-term adherence.

The benefits of vegetarian/vegan diets are also highlighted, which can be heart-healthy when well-planned and include a variety of plant-based protein sources, whole grains, fruits, and vegetables. Additionally, plant-based diets, including those that incorporate small amounts of animal products, are shown to have positive environmental impacts.

HCPs can play a role in encouraging behaviour change that is good for human health and the planet.

It is well known that humanity's window for taking climate action is rapidly closing. As demonstrated by Shah and Merlo in their viewpoint², the world now produces more than 3-times the meat and more than double the milk as it did 50 years ago, negatively affecting the delicate ecosystem. Changes need to happen, but this change won't be easy. As for instance the EAT-Lancet commission noted, a greater than 100% increase in consumption of nuts, fruits, vegetables, and legumes would be required to help transform our diets to a more healthy and sustainable way of living³.

This is where HCPs can play an important role in encouraging positive behaviour change with patients, that is both good for human and planetary health. Since dietary choices are the largest driver of chronic diseases, facilitating conversations with patients about healthy, sustainable, plant-rich diets could not only help reduce the burden on intensively farmed animal products, but also may help reduce the incidence of e.g., obesity, CVD, and diabetes. The image below demonstrates this in more detail.



Good communication is needed!

A consideration, however, is the communication of such information. Despite sustainable nutrition messages weaving their way into national and international guidelines (currently 45% of guidelines include environmental sustainability), how this information is communicated to the individual has the tendency to be overwhelming, confusing, and too complicated. This is coupled with the raft of misinformation on the internet about diet and nutrition. Therefore, HCPs must find simple and easy ways to communicate healthy and sustainable diets to their patients, that focuses on a few key messages. To finding out about healthy and sustainable diets, explore the *Diet at the Heart* online toolkit here: [Diet at the heart of CVD prevention](#)

References

1. Gardner et al. Popular Dietary Patterns: Alignment with American Heart Association 2021 Dietary Guidance: A Scientific Statement from the American Heart Association AHA scientific statement. *Circulation*. 2023;147:00-00. DOI: 10.1161/CIR.000000000001146
2. Shah and Merlo. Personal and Planetary Health - The Connection with Dietary Choices, Viewpoint. *JAMA* Published online May 8, 2023; doi:10.1001/jama.2023.6118
3. Willett W, Rockström J, Loken B, et al. Food in the Anthropocene: the EAT-Lancet Commission on healthy diets from sustainable food systems. *Lancet*. 2019;393(10170):447-492. doi:10.1016/S0140-6736 (18)31788-4