

What SA dietitians say about the planetary health diet

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For the first time in human history there is a proposal on the table that all the world's people follow the same diet. The [EAT-Lancet Commission](#) brought together more than 30 world-leading experts to figure out if we can feed a future population of 10 billion people a healthy diet within sustainable planetary boundaries. According to the report's authors, food is "the single strongest lever to optimise health and environmental sustainability on earth."



The healthy eating plan that they have subsequently developed, and are now promoting to governments and other agencies around the world, is closely aligned to the World Health Organisation (WHO) guidelines for healthy diets and the current trend of prioritising plant-based foods. Lecturer at North-West University and spokesperson for ADSA (Association for Dietetics in South Africa) Dr Mariaan Wicks describes the planetary health diet as: "...rich in plant-based foods, with fewer animal source foods and limited amounts of added sugars. The planetary health plate consists of approximately half a plate of non-starchy vegetables and fruits, preferably locally produced, fresh and in season. The other half of the plate should primarily consist of whole grains, plant protein sources such as legumes and nuts, with only modest amounts of unsaturated plant oils and animal sources of proteins."

Why is the planetary health diet good for the earth?

The world's food systems are grappling with the issues of needing to produce more food for a growing population on a planet where the sustainable boundaries have already been breached. The EAT-Lancet researchers looked at how to feed more people while reducing greenhouse gas emissions, preventing further species extinction, curbing the expansion of farmland and conserving water. Their recommendation to reduce our consumption of animal protein is because its production has the highest detrimental impact on the environment. Similarly, the limitations on eating highly processed foods are in line with reducing the negative consequences of food manufacturing and distribution. According to Dr Wicks our will to create a more sustainable world for our future generations makes changing our diets inevitable. "The composition of our diets determines the impact of food on the environment, and the food system is where the domains of our health and the health of the environment meet," she says. "Earth is our home, and it is the only one we have. The responsibility to take care of the planet falls on each one of us, and therefore, dietary adaptations are essential."

How do we change to the planetary health diet?

Following the planetary health diet will demand different changes for different peoples and different countries. In South

Africa, the biggest impacts would be the reduced intakes of animal proteins, added sugars and starchy vegetables. Globally, the eating plan aims to halve the world's consumption of red meat, and to achieve that goal, the world's top red meat-eating countries, such as the USA, need to reduce their consumption by 80% which equates to eating one hamburger a week, or a big steak once a month. Dr Wicks advises that South Africans can take small steps towards eating more sustainably rather than making sweeping changes. The planetary health diet offers an incredible variety of plant-based foods, and there are excellent sources of plant proteins that provide complete amino acid requirements. Getting used to eating less meat, eggs and dairy doesn't mean we won't be eating delicious meals. "Every little change can make a big difference," says Dr Wicks. "Start with little easy changes, and then as you become more comfortable and familiar add new changes."

Dr Wicks points out that eating more sustainably is not just about food choices but also includes food packaging issues and how we reduce food waste. Her examples of simple changes that we as South Africans can make to eat more sustainably include:

- Rethink the amount of meat you consume in your regular diet. Little changes such as reducing your portion size and the amount of times in a specific day or week that you consume meat, especially red meat, can contribute greatly in reducing your carbon footprint.
- Try to include at least one meat-free day in your week, breakfast, lunch, snacks and dinner. Experiment with beans, lentils and chickpeas in the place of meat. There are fantastic recipes available online that are easy and affordable. My personal favourites are tomato-based whole-wheat pasta dishes and a chickpea, black bean and cauliflower curry with brown rice.
- Exchange your breakfast of eggs, bacon and sausages for a delicious vegetarian omelette with onions, tomatoes, mushrooms and peppers.
- Develop a week menu and plan your meals and food shopping for the week. By having a clear plan for what you want to buy, you will not only save money and time but will also limit your food waste.
- Limit the amount of meat included in your weekend braai to only one meat option. You can always add other braai items such as black mushrooms with a garlic butter filling, brinjals in barbeque sauce and vegetable sosaties made with onions, peppers, cherry tomatoes and baby marrows.
- To reduce dependence on refined starches, experiment with other starchy foods such as brown rice, couscous and whole-wheat pasta. You can replace your starchy vegetables and maize meal side-dishes by creating other fantastic side-dishes simply by adding these starchy foods to your salads and vegetables. Include some lentils or chickpeas and then you have a complete meal.
- Rethink what you do with food waste. Using leftovers for the next day's lunchboxes or freezing the remaining sauces for a base for a next meal is a good start.
- Buy fresh, seasonal, locally-produced fruit and vegetables, and limit pre-cut and packaged fruits and vegetables. By doing this you will not only save money but will also dramatically reduce your plastic use.
- Choose water instead of sugar-sweetened beverages. Use re-usable bottles to limit your single-use plastic items."

While the planetary health diet focuses on a sustainable global food system that is better for the environment, we mustn't forget that it has also been specifically designed to be beneficial to human health. The EAT-Lancet researchers believe that the planetary health diet can save 11 million human lives by reducing overweight, obesity and other diet-related health issues. In the sense that all life is connected and interdependent, what is good for the planet is also good for us.

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