A plant-based diet without preservatives, processing and refining, can reverse most lifestyle diseases without the need for medicines

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D an Brotherton was overweight and had high blood pressure for years. Until he adopted a low-fat vegan diet some two years ago. Since then, his weight has remained between 75 and 79 kgs — "I eat like a horse and am never hungry." His blood pressure in the last three years has stayed around 125/75, plus or minus 10 points without medication. His lichen planus (a chronic condition of the skin and mouth) has almost cleared up and the trigger finger on his left hand that kept locking doesn't lock any more. And yes, his gums no longer bleed.

Gerald Klosky, 69, had a history of adult-type diabetes for which he took five different kinds of medications (eight pills and two to three shots of insulin a day). He also had high blood pressure for which he took four kinds of medications (seven pills a day). This represents over $350 a month in medication costs (from a discount online pharmacy — costs would be much more from a local drugstore). He also suffered from obesity, severe constipation and bone loss. But after Klosky adopted a low-fat vegan diet, he threw away all of his medication. "I feel greater than I have felt for decades. I have shaken off the shackles of an unhealthy lifestyle."

Dan Brotherton and Gerald Klosky are a part of thousands of people who have benefited from a low-fat whole-plant-based diet. A diet programme introduced by renowned American physician and author, Dr John McDougall, that is said to reverse medical conditions that include diabetes, obesity, heart disease as well as auto-immune diseases. The human body is a perfect machine. However, the wrong input can cause several problems. Just as putting low-quality petrol affects the functioning of a vehicle, similarly, a wrong diet is the cause behind most diseases, including diabetes and arthritis.

With India being the diabetes capital of the world, this philosophy acquired added significance.

McDougall says that starch is the food that civilisations have been based on since centuries. So, what is a starch diet? It is a plant-based diet that consists of plants, without additions or substractions. Adding includes preservatives, colours and many other such ingredients that can cause harm to the human body. Subtracting includes processing and refining. Sugar, maize, oil are typical examples of foods which have elements that have been removed from the original plant form.

Protein is extremely misunderstood. Plants contain proteins and all the essential amino acids needed to build it. Animal protein, therefore, is not necessary to get the protein your body needs. In fact, scientists have found that animal proteins are particularly damaging to the body because so many of their amino acids contain sulphur, which is far more toxic to the kidneys and liver than vegetable protein.

Cholesterol management is a big issue for most urban Indians. The body produces all the cholesterol it needs, and as for fats, plants already contain adequate amounts and only plants make the essential fatty acids your body needs to function. What's more, plant food never contains cholesterol. Carbohydrates and starch are what the body needs. Starch is the primary source of energy, and it alone provides energy for red blood cells and certain cells of the brain. They are also the preferred fuel for the central nervous system, including the brain. There

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have the highest incidence of osteoporosis of any population in the world! Plant foods contain generous amounts of calcium. Osteoporosis is not a disease that results from too little calcium, but primarily from acids derived from too much animal protein that rob the body of calcium and individual nutrients, like protein or calcium, while being deficient in others. By contrast, plant foods are rich in antioxidants and provide a wide spectrum of vitamins, minerals and other health-promoting nutrients. Plant foods are the most abundant sources of nutrition on earth — there are 13 essential nutrients and 11 of them are made from plants. The two that are not produced by plants are vitamins B1 and B12, which are stored in your tissues for a long time. One can get enough Vitamin D with adequate exposure to sunlight and B12 can be easily supplemented.

Plant-based foods provide a holistic solution to the needs of the human body. Today, many Indians are prescribed various kinds of medications for different diseases, but it for control or prevention. A plant-based diet negates the need for all these different medications by providing all the requirements that the body needs. An individual's need not bother about eating specific foods to prevent or "cure" different diseases. Whole grains, unrefined flours, potatoes, sweet potatoes, corn, beans, legumes, lentils, peas and fruits go a long way in keeping the body functioning at an optimum level. However, the moment foods such as cows' milk, butter, cheese, cottage cheese, yoghurt, sour cream, ice cream, eggs, meat, margarine, vegetable oils, sugar, white rice, white flour, refined and sugar-coated cereals, chocolate, coffee and cola are introduced, the problem begins. Most of them can be replaced by healthy substitutes like nut butters and nut-based cheeses and milks.

With 30 years of research and successful results backing him, McDougall has helped thousands of people reverse degenerative diseases simply by adopting a low-fat, whole-foods plant-based diet.

It all started when he himself in 1985, at the age of 19, suffered from a massive stroke, which left him completely paralysed on the left side for two weeks. This set him thinking and on researching, he realised that the American diet was the major cause behind his ill state of health.

He then started observing his older patients who had migrated to the US from the far east and were comparatively trim and healthy, for their diet mainly consisted of rice and vegetables. "They had no diabetes, heart disease, arthritis or any kinds of cancers," he recalls. "However, their children tempted by western food slowly changed. And the third generation totally gave up rice and vegetables for meat, dairy and junk. They became fatter and sicker, and most of their grandchildren lost all their immunity to obesity and common diseases."

McDougall's mission, to spread awareness of how we can regain our health simply by eating right, has gained ground over the years. He has helped thousands of people solve problems like obesity, diabetes, heart disease, hypertension, peptic ulcer, arthritis, asthma and autoimmune disorders. "Getting to grips clearly; keeps you in the pink of health!"

The writer is an ex-Indian army officer in the Subedar's rank. He had a master's degree in public administration and served at the UN headquarters in New York. He has been residing in the US for 30 years. He is married to an American and has three children.

(For the last three years, Dr McDougall has conducted workshops across India, covering over 12 million people.)

[The writer's note: The book, "Fast Food, Don't Die!" by McDougall, is available in all major bookstores.]

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