

The Fitness Motivation Monitor

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Are You a “Flexible” Eater?

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Many of you may have been tempted to become vegetarians, but the thought of giving up barbecues or mom’s famous meatloaf seems too daunting. Thankfully, you can obtain many of the same benefits of vegetarian living without forgoing chicken breasts completely. You just have to become a “flexitarian.”

Flexitarians eat mostly plant-based foods but dabble in steak, chicken stir-fry or fish tacos. “Think of it as a pro-plant, not anti-meat dietary lifestyle,” says Dawn Jackson Blatner, RD, LDN, a Chicago-based dietitian and author of *The Flexitarian Diet*.

While about 3% of Americans are traditional vegetarians, it’s unclear how many consider themselves flexitarians. However, nutritionists like Blatner believe the numbers are on the upswing, judging from the burgeoning veggie options in supermarkets. Blatner credits much of the growth of flexitarianism to the nation’s increasing understanding of the diet-disease connection.

Here’s why it might be time to embrace flexitarianism:

It’s, Well, Flexible

What exactly does being a flexitarian entail? “As the name suggests, the beauty of flexitarianism is that it’s all about options,” says Blatner.

You can embrace meatless Mondays, making 1 day a week meat-free. Or you can start by simply cutting the quantity of meat in certain meals; for example, replacing half the beef in burgers and tacos with mushrooms.

Blatner sees three categories of flexitarians:

- Beginner: eats two meatless meals a week.
- Advanced: eats three to four meatless meals a week.
- Expert: eats five or more plant-only meals a week.

As you get used to eating less meat, flexitarian advocates say, the cravings for daily meat should subside. Still, with this eating plan you needn’t beat yourself up for giving in to the occasional steak craving or Big Mac attack.

It Can Trim Your Waistline

Researchers at Boston’s Tufts University compared food-frequency questionnaires from more than 55,000 healthy women, finding that semi-vegetarians—who consume just small amounts of animal products—were 11% less likely to be overweight or obese than regular omnivores. Similarly, a *Journal of the American Dietetic Association* study showed that subjects who ate or drank more calories from animal proteins were at greater risk of being overweight or obese than those who consumed less animal protein. And a 2011 study in *The New England Journal of Medicine* involving more than 120,000 men and women determined that 4-year weight gain was inversely associated with the intake of fruit, nuts, vegetables and whole grains, while a high intake of red meat, processed meats and sugar-sweetened beverages was a risk factor for Buddha belly.

It Offers a Better Nutrient Balance

Plant-based foods are rich in fiber, disease-thwarting antioxidants and a number of vitamins (such as vitamin C) that you won’t find in meats. So it is no surprise that an *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* study found that semi-vegetarians live on average 3.6 years longer than meat-adoring non-vegetarians, likely owing to lower rates of chronic diseases that have a diet connection—such as diabetes, heart disease and cancer.

Yet, by including reasonable amounts of animal-based foods in your diet, White says, you don’t have to worry as much about getting enough protein, calcium, vitamin D, iron and vitamin B₁₂, which can be lacking in stringent vegetarian and vegan diets.

Happy flexing!



Deborah Longenecker



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Stand Up for a Better Core

Adapted from IDEA Fitness Journal Nov - Dec 2011

Why do we usually train the core from the floor? It's time to take a stand. Get on your feet and out of the computer-typing, freeway-driving position. The following multi-joint, multi-planar moves provide a full-body workout while emphasizing core musculature. They encourage movements that require more work and recruit more muscles, both of which may aid in fat loss. These four standing moves from Connecticut trainer Ellen Barrett will hone your balance and improve posture, while giving you straight-up great abs.

Canoe

Stand with your feet 3 feet apart, knees slightly bent, and hands clasped. Keeping your hips still, bring your hands down to your left hip, "paddling" backward. Next, raise your hands up to chest level, and then paddle them to the right hip. Do 10 alternating reps for each side. If it's too easy, hold a 2- to 5-pound dumbbell in each hand.



Knee Cross Crunch

Stand with your shoulders in line with your hips, and extend your right arm up and your left leg to the side, toes pointed. Next, lower your right elbow and raise your left knee, crunching them together on a diagonal line. Return to start.



Double Arm Reach

Stand with your feet 3 feet apart and hands clasped. Contract your abs and perform a plié keeping your hands toward the floor. As you push up, raise your arms to the right. Next, lower your hands with another plié and then lift them to the left. Too easy? Hold a 2- to 5-pound dumbbell in each hand.



Side Imprint

Stand with your shoulders in line with your hips and raise your right arm. Shift onto your left leg and rotate your right leg at the hip, turning your toes out. Crunch your right elbow and right knee together, pinching your waist. Return to start.



Massage Away Your Back Pain

From IDEA Fitness Journal Nov - Dec 2011

For chronic low-back pain, massage therapy seems to be more effective than medications, physical therapy, education and exercise. These findings—from a randomized controlled trial conducted by researchers at the Group Health Research Institute; the University of Washington, Seattle; the Oregon Health & Science University, Portland; and the University of Vermont, Burlington—were published in the *Annals of Internal Medicine* (2011; 155 [1], 1–9). The study's purpose was to compare the short-term and long-term effects of structural massage, relaxation massage and usual care for people with chronic low-back pain.



Investigators randomly assigned 401 people who had been experiencing nonspecific chronic low-back pain for at least 3 months to one of three groups: structural massage, relaxation massage or usual care. Structural massage focuses on specific pain-related soft tissue. Relaxation massage (e.g., Swedish massage) promotes overall relaxation through long strokes, kneading, circular movements or vibration. Usual medical care consists of medication, physical therapy, back exercises and education. Massage subjects received a 1-hour massage once per week for 10 weeks. All participants were assessed for symptoms, medication use and functional ability at the end of 10 weeks and again after 6 months and 1 year.

Data analysis showed that patients in both massage groups spent fewer days in bed, were more active and used less anti-inflammatory medication than those who received usual care. After 10 weeks, function had significantly improved in twice as many massage patients as usual-care patients. Lead study author, Daniel C. Cherkin, PhD, senior investigator at Group Health Research Institute, said, "We found that massage helps people with back pain to function even after 6 months. As expected with most treatments, the benefits of massage declined over time." After 1 year, massage benefits were no longer significant.

So, bottom line, you now have an excuse to get a weekly massage – it reduced my low back pain!

Cherkin and colleagues advised doing further research to determine why massage therapy is so effective and why both structural and relaxation massage are equally effective.