

Let food be thy medicine and medicine be thy food. Welcome to SBH Bronx Health Talk produced by SBH Health System and broadcast from the beautiful studios at Saint Barnabas Hospital in the Bronx. I'm Stephen Clark. Hippocrates, the father of medicine, was on to something when he spoke about the relationship between medicine and food back in about 400 BC. A growing number of much more recent studies have shown that food in the form of a plant-based diet can act as medicine to help prevent and even reverse chronic conditions that plague the Bronx like heart disease, diabetes, and cancer. With us to discuss the plant-based diet is Andrea Plunkett, a registered dietitian at SBH Health System. Welcome Andrea.

*Thank you. Good morning.*

So let's start out. What is a plant-based diet? What are we talking about here?

*So a plant-based diet means prioritizing plant foods, eating mainly whole plant foods. Most foods are unprocessed or minimally process so your whole foods, fruits and vegetables, whole grains, beans, legumes, nuts, and seeds.*

And so what we're saying, we should become vegetarians or vegans? What is that exactly? What does it mean?

*So plant-based diet has a lot of variations. There is a vegan diet that is pretty much a strict vegetarian, where vegans don't eat any animal products. But there are also semi-vegetarian where they incorporate, occasionally, may have meat and dairy.*

*But the focus of the diet is pretty much incorporating whole foods from plant-based.*

Ok so what you're saying is that you can adapt the plant-based diet but not be a purist. It means you can still eat occasionally dairy products, or made, or whatever right?

*Exactly. So giving yourself some flexibility but mainly focus on the plant-based part of the diet. So having occasionally or periodically adding some dairy, cheese, low-fat cheese, eggs and occasionally meat.*

So it's- it's not a totally radical change is it?

*No, it's-it's not. So pretty much, changes are pretty much hard you know, starting small and gradually, you know, moving from one stage to the other. So um- slowly.*

I understand, I did a little research here, I understand there's a book called the China Study which examined diets in rural China and its relationship to cardiovascular and cancer related diseases about 15 years ago. I guess that's what got researchers first involved and realizing this could make a difference right?

*Yes. The book is about a culminating event in China where they look at in different areas, look at dietary patterns you know in different areas in China. So pretty much people who eat mainly plant-based diet, they have lower rates of*

*cardiovascular disease cancer and other chronic diseases.*

I also know that we did a study here at SBH Health System with providers, with attendings, residents, and medical students. And the results showed that a lot of these physicians are hesitant to work with the community in getting them to change their diet. Does that- is that surprising to you?

*It's not surprising because when you think about plant-based um- you know people just think our focus is that it's like strict vegetarian or you have to completely change your way of eating. But you know gradually changing, and education, and increasing awareness, educating people about the benefits you know will get them to- to be more involved.*

I guess here in the Bronx where there's a real melting pot, and there's a lot of you know tradition, a lot of cultural tradition and what people eat you know. There's the beans and rice diet. It must be particularly difficult to get people to change what they've been doing for generations as far as they're eating right?

*That is true you know. People are used to eating what they're eating for all their lives so behavior change is a process. You know, identifying where a person is at during that process and then, you know, trying to motivate them to help them to change telling them about the benefits- the benefits of plant-based and the health benefits. That's the first step.*

But again, it's really like life changing, and lifesaving. I mean, if someone incorporates a plant-based diet and again, it's not gonna I assumed change your life, it's not going to change your health overnight. But in the course of time, you're confident it can make a real change in a person's health correct?

*Yes, that's correct. And nowadays, people are you know more in tune to health. People are interested in learning about health, or ways how to stay healthy, or to be healthy. The change is pretty gradual and it's a process.*

Let's talk in specifics. You know, someone wants to change their health, they're overweight, they feel sluggish, they maybe have a family history of chronic illness. What is the diet like? What does it include? What are some of the things that suddenly you're eating that maybe you didn't eat before?

*In terms of eating, once again, the focus is on educating people: telling them about increase in fruits and vegetables, like the first start. Just for example, think about your plate. Make half of your plate vegetables you know, putting in some fruits in it. So small changes because small changes add up to big wins eventually. So you know incorporating that small change just started starting to eat vegetables if they've never eaten vegetables before.*

And I guess I mean you see patients here on a daily basis. Is it a problem in the Bronx? I mean, I know we've called the Bronx sort of a food desert, where it's difficult to find fresh fruit or vegetables and people go to bodegas and won't have it and maybe they eat starchy food or what have-

or what's out there. Are you starting to work with your patients I'm trying to slowly change their diets?

*Yes so as a dietician in the outpatient clinic, the nutrition clinic is focused on, first of all educating, increasing awareness, educating people about the benefits and also identifying their barriers you know. Like in the Bronx, you know, availability of fresh fruits and vegetables that is affordable. So you know, looking at their barriers and then helping them to get over those hurdles, you know, to find ways how to get over those barriers.*

I mean, I saw just from personal experience. One day I was driving around the Bronx and I had a meeting and so I had to stop for a quick lunch and I went into some fast food place. And you couldn't buy a bottle of water. All they were selling were sugared beverages and not just 12 ounce beverages but like 24 ounce beverages. I mean that, on a you know, a family that lives in the Bronx and is eating this or drinking this every day has to pay a toll you know. This has to be a real problem right?

*Yes it is a problem. And getting involved in the community, you know, going out there doing outreach programs, you know and educating our patients um- here in the clinic and most patients that come to me they are pretty receptive and they want to make a change.*

When you're eating a plant-based diet are you getting the necessary nutritional value that you need? I mean you're not eating meat or not eating meat like you did before is that gonna cause a problem?

*So a plant-based diet that is well planned is nutritionally adequate. You're getting sources of protein from your beans, on your legumes you know. B12 is a vitamin that is mainly in animal products so you could get B12 from fortified cereal, fortified eggs so there are fortified products out there. Iron is another vitamin of concern so plant sources are loaded with iron so spinach, leafy greens so education once again, it comes back to education.*

So you don't have to use supplements to give you the nutrients you want. If you go- if you eventually move towards a diet like this, what you're eating should suffice.

*If you're eating adequately then what you're eating should suffice that.*

Again we talked earlier about the part that culture plays on diet. Yes we're changing people's diet, we're trying to change people's diet, but can we do it with a you know Hispanic flair or Italian flair or something so they don't feel they're eating something that's totally foreign to them?

*Yes because part of the change is also trying to incorporate people's cultural foods or your cultural beliefs into changing. So modifying recipes, making it healthier but at the same time staying within their cultural beliefs, their cultural values, but just making it healthier.*

So what may that look like? You know, if you're dealing with a Hispanic family and you're trying to get them away from the diet they were eating to

something that's healthier, how are you incorporating that- the culture into that?

*Okay, so for example, in the Spanish culture they like rice and beans. So instead of using white rice, you tell them about using whole grain or brown rice um- adding in your beans into that. Instead of frying foods every day you know, bake it or steam it, or broil or you know, healthy cooking methods.*

Now also a year from now, SBH Health System will be opening a health and wellness center across the street. And what's really interesting to me is we're going to be incorporating there a- a rooftop farm which means we're going to be producing, you know, vegetables and fruits. And in addition, we're gonna have a teaching kitchen which is going to you know, teach staff as well as the community how to- how to eat healthy. What's your thoughts about that?

*I think that is a great idea because you know, having people see you know, it's growing actually, taking it from the garden and then actually putting it in the kitchen. That's a great example and a great idea to get- get people involved and you know increasing awareness.*

And hopefully the Bronx will no longer be a food desert right?

*Exactly.*

Andrea thank you very much for joining us today on SBH Bronx Health

Talk for information on services available at SBH Health System, you can visit us at [www.sbhny.org](http://www.sbhny.org) and thank you for joining us.

*Thanks very much for having me.*

Until next time.