



Healthy Eating Initiative: Keto and Plant-Based Diets for Reducing Cancer Risk

Cancer is one of the leading causes of death worldwide, but knowing which dietary pattern can reduce the risk of developing cancer remains a challenge. While cancer is caused by many factors, diet can have a profound effect on a person's risk. Among the many diets recommended for cancer prevention and treatment, two tend to get the most attention: the ketogenic (keto) diet and a whole-food plant-based diet. In a recent review, researchers compared the two popular diets to see which one had more evidence supporting its potential to lower cancer risk and improve the health of cancer survivors.

A whole-food plant-based diet is focused on nutrient-dense plant-based foods, like nuts, fruits, vegetables, and beans. People who follow this diet also limit their intake of processed foods, oils, and animal products. Researchers have determined a plant-based diet can better negate several risk factors for cancer, including excess fat, inflammation, insulin resistance, and elevated levels of insulin-like growth factor (a protein known to promote cancer development). In addition, plant-based foods are rich in phytochemicals (plant chemicals) such as flavonoids, that offer cancer-fighting antioxidant and anti-inflammatory effects.

Although evidence favors a whole-foods plant-based diet, there can be benefits to a keto diet as well. A keto diet focuses more on the macronutrients consumed than on specific food choices. The phrase "ketogenic diet" is an umbrella term for different aspects of fat intake. One person's keto diet may be heavy in animal-based proteins and fats, but another person's keto diet may emphasize plant-based fats such as olive oil and avocado. Both ketogenic and plant-based diets can provide the correct quantities of macronutrients to achieve ketosis which is the desired effect of using fat for energy. There is no rule that says that a ketogenic diet must include animal products. The human body can achieve ketosis with plant foods only when they are well-chosen.

If you want to follow a keto diet that offers some of the benefits of a whole-food plant-based diet, focus on incorporating:

- Non-starchy vegetables
- Avocados
- Fatty fish
- Extra virgin olive oil
- Macadamia nuts

When in doubt, remember that prioritizing whole-plant based and unprocessed foods are most likely going to have beneficial effects on overall health, risk for obesity, diabetes, and risk of cancer. These should make up the bulk of your meals.

Additional Resources:

- NIH: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/35797039/>
- Very Well Health: <https://www.verywellhealth.com/plant-based-versus-keto-diet-reduce-cancer-risk-5649652#citation-3>

