

Can We Stop This Premature Loss of Lives?

A recent visit to a local grocery store paints a picture of how cultural food norms, and food systems create environments that reinforce biases and promote unhealthy diets. The store visit pictures are curated in this [video](#).

The World Health Organization reports that each year, 15 million people between the ages of 30 and 69 years die from four groups of diseases too familiar to us today; [Heart disease, cancer, respiratory conditions, and diabetes]. In addition, these diseases account for over 80% of all premature deaths in the world. These conditions result from a combination of environmental, genetic, physiological and behaviors factors. We can focus of the environmental and behavioral factors at an individual and community level to address this premature loss of lives. Why is it so difficult to stop this death train? The reasons are complex and although solutions exist, they are not easy to implement. Some of the answers are in understanding our physiology and psychology. We are habitual, social creatures and we learn extremely well by imitation, consciously or unconsciously. Another powerfully influential feature of our existence is that as humans, we desire acceptance by our social circles/family. Therefore, a lot of the behaviors we exhibit, and foods we consume, are part of how we are socialized, cultured or taught, and since they are engrained in who we are, change, even small change is difficult.

Knowing yourself, your food, and choosing health consistently

Knowing oneself includes having an awareness of why we do the things we do, choose the food we eat, and questioning the reasons. Having working knowledge of our health status, genetic predispositions to disease, and being equipped for a long-term lifestyle change is key.

Knowing our food includes having some basic knowledge of its source, its purpose to our biology, and basic benefits and dangers to the body.

Choosing health consistently is key. It means choosing health even when it is not an option presented to us. Advocating for the option to be available where it is not. Consistently disrupting the unhealthy message, trend, the default, culture or norm. This practice requires that we make the difficult choice to abandon culture, norms, un-helpful-socialization, peer pressure, and other pressures because we choose health. This practice is a courageous leadership opportunity to bring others along the journey to health.

The challenge we face is that our diets are primarily heavy in animal based proteins- beef, chicken, pork, eggs, sausages, dairy etc. We are habitually consume an animal-based diet, which are less healthy; hence plant-based diets are difficult to adhere to. Given a plate of a variety of meats and one with a variety of vegetables for instance, most individuals would choose the former. Science is strong on the benefits of a plant based diet in reducing deaths due to Heart disease, cancer, respiratory conditions, and diabetes.

A strong plant based diet should include fruits, vegetables, whole grains, legumes, and nuts. It is recommended to have these foods whole rather than processed. Find [recipes](#) that make the transition easier.

Here are three recommendations to start our challenge:

- Increase intake of whole fresh, frozen, dried and canned fruits and vegetables without added sugar or salt. Whole fruits and vegetables contain immune-boosting vitamins and minerals, water and bulk in the form of soluble and insoluble fiber, which help us feel fuller on fewer calories. Goal is 3 servings of vegetable/day and 2 servings of fruit/day.
- Next, 2-4 days/week, replace animal proteins with beans, peas and lentils (legumes), nuts or seeds. Legumes are typically low in fat and high in folate, potassium, iron and magnesium, and they contain beneficial fats, protein and fiber.
- Eat your grains whole. Whole grains are packed with nutrients including vitamins, minerals, fiber and phytochemicals. Let us educate ourselves on why this is important [here](#)

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