

An Interview with Brenda Davis, R.D.

by Mark Huberman

Brenda Davis, R.D., registered dietitian, is a leader in her field and an internationally acclaimed speaker. As a prolific nutrition and health writer, she has co-authored 10 books, with over a million copies in print in 13 languages. Her most recent works include *The Kick Diabetes Cookbook* (2018), *Becoming Vegan: Comprehensive Edition* (2014), and *Becoming Vegan: Express Edition* (2013). She is currently working on an 11th diabetes book to be released in 2019. She has also authored numerous professional and lay articles. Brenda is the lead clinical nutrition specialist for the diabetes intervention project in the Marshall Islands, and recently completed a lifestyle intervention demonstration program in Lithuania. She and her writing partner, Vesanto Melina, developed and teach the nutrition program at Living Light Culinary Institute. She is a past chair of the Vegetarian Nutrition Dietetic Practice Group of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, and in 2007 was inducted into the Vegetarian Hall of Fame. Brenda lives in Kelowna, British Columbia with her husband, Paul Davis, and has two grown children and one granddaughter. For more information, visit brendadavisrd.com.



From your Canadian accent, it sounds like you've been a Canadian all your life. Is that right?

Good observation! My dad's ancestors immigrated to Canada in the early 1600s, so we have a long history in this country. I currently live in Kelowna, British Columbia, which is about four to five hours east of Vancouver. It's almost semi-desert, but we have a 90-mile lake that runs right through our city, so there are beaches everywhere. I live on a mountain with miles of hiking and biking trails throughout.

Sounds idyllic!

It really is—and to top it off, it is one of Canada's main fruit-growing regions.

That's why you stay there, right?

It definitely is! Every year, I freeze close to 300 pounds of fruit and dehydrate another 50 pounds.

Were your parents vegetarian or vegan, or did you go through some type of personal health crisis that led you to rethink your assumptions about health?

It certainly didn't begin with my parents. My dad was

in the Air Force, and I grew up in Germany, where my favorite food as a kid was wiener schnitzel! However, I always had a soft heart for animals, like so many of us do. I vividly recall picking worms off the sidewalk after a rain-fall when I was a young child, and cheering for the bull at a bull fight in Spain when I was just three years old. As a teenager, I found the thought of surviving without killing anything quite compelling, although it seemed like a practical impossibility.

The event that pushed me over the edge took place about 30 years ago, when a very dear friend stopped by our house on his way to go deer hunting. I tried to make him feel guilty about killing another deer, and what he said to me completely changed the course of my life. He said, "You know, just because you don't have

the guts to pull the trigger doesn't mean you are not responsible for the trigger being pulled every time you buy a piece of meat camouflaged in cellophane in the grocery store. At least the animals I eat have had a life."

Wow!

His words silenced me, because I knew he was right.

"My dad was in the Air Force, and I grew up in Germany, where my favorite food as a kid was wiener schnitzel!"

No one had ever challenged me to take responsibility for the food I was eating and to think about where it actually came from. That incident drove me on to further investigation about the sources of all food, not just animal food, but plant food as well.

Do you think that if more people had personal contact with the animals being slaughtered there would be a greater sensibility toward their suffering?

Without a doubt. It's as if we have blinders on, and when we take them off and see what's going on, we can't help but change the way we think about using animals for food. If people really understood the sensibilities of animals, they could no longer justify the atrocities that are committed against them. For example, a pig is as intelligent as a three- to five-year-old child, and can easily be trained to play a simple computer game with a joy stick. In their natural environment they would live 12-15 years. Raised for meat, they live an excruciating six months. Slaughter line speeds are so fast, it is estimated that an estimated 10-30% of them are skinned alive. It doesn't make sense that as a species we cause such incredible pain, suffering, and death to other living beings. Not only is it totally unnecessary, but we are killing ourselves and destroying the planet in the process.

So, when the hunter stopped you in your tracks, what was the next step in your education?

The next step was turning to the literature. I began reading materials from the World Health Organization and ordering agricultural journals so I could better understand that industry. I was already a public health nutritionist, and it took me about two weeks of reading to decide that I'm not doing that anymore. This is when I became a vegan.

Two weeks is pretty quick!

Yes, it was, but I knew that I didn't want to be a part of the system of cruelty any longer.

What was your husband's response to this sudden conversion?

We had been married for about 10 years at that time and did not know any vegetarians, as we lived in hunting and fishing country. However, when I asked my husband



Brenda with her husband Paul

if he would consider becoming completely vegetarian with me, he shockingly said, "I thought you'd never ask; I'd love to be vegetarian!" For him, it was mostly about the environment. He wanted to leave a smaller footprint, and he knew that eating lower on the food chain was a huge step in the right direction. So, I married well!

Indeed, you did! Once you made that lifestyle change, did you start gravitating toward the leading figures in our movement?

Absolutely! The first lecture I ever heard on plant-based living was delivered by Dr. Michael Klaper. It was funny because as soon as I made the decision to become vegetarian, I ran across an issue of *Vegetarian Times* that had a feature on John Robbins. I fell in love with both of them and ordered their books. They have both become dear friends. I also began to discover other vegetarian dietitians, including my writing partner for over 25 years, Vesanto Melina.

"I was already a public health nutritionist, and it took me about two weeks of reading to decide that I'm not doing that anymore."

In today's whole-food, plant-based health movement, a lot of the leading authorities tend to shy away from the word "vegan," I

think because it is so disassociated with health. Do you consider yourself a vegan or do you find the term problematic?

Yes, I'm definitely a vegan, and I have no problem with the term. I'm a whole-food, plant-based vegan, but I understand the concern of those who point out that many vegans eat a lot of vegan junk food. I think people need to understand that being "plant-based" does not mean being vegan. Keep in mind that all of the populations in the Blue Zones are plant-based but none of them are vegan (with the exception of the people from Loma Linda); they all include some animal products. A "plant-based" diet can include animal products, and I would maintain that it is a very reasonable direction to head for the general population. It is a heck of a lot better than an animal-rich diet, like Keto or Paleo.

So, do you recommend a 100% whole-food, plant-based diet as we in the NHA do?

I absolutely do, and that is because I'm an ethical vegan. Of course, in answer to the question of whether we need to be 100% plant-based to enjoy good health, no, we don't. We see all kinds of healthy people, particularly those

in the Blue Zones, who do quite well despite including small amounts of animal products in their diet. But we have to look beyond ourselves and ask what diet will sustain a very large population on an ever-shrinking planet. It makes sense that we shift toward a completely plant-based way of eating for the human species. In my opinion, it's both an ethical and ecological imperative that we move in that direction.

What is your assessment of the movement promoting the shift in agriculture to grass-fed beef and free-range chickens? Do you consider this to be a step forward or a step backward; a net positive or a net negative?

Oh, boy, that's a tough question because, obviously, I think it's a kinder way for the animals to live, although it doesn't much change the way they die. If it makes meat much more expensive, then it's a positive because people will consume less. However, if it makes meat-eating less morally reprehensible in the eyes of those consuming it, it's a huge negative.

I don't think it's the direction we should be going, because it's much harder on the environment, since it actually increases greenhouse emissions compared to raising animals in confinement. It also concerns me that we may be creating a sort of "humane myth," that if we raise animals in this way instead of that way, it makes it all right to eat them; and I don't think it does.

What do you think of new products like Beyond Burgers and the like?

From an ethical perspective, I'm very excited about them since they potentially reduce our reliance on meat. But let's be clear: these are not health foods. Some of them are genetically modified and contain questionable ingredients. But if we can figure out a way to grow or produce something that feels like meat—and satisfies that desire that so many have for that particular flavor—without using, growing, and abusing animals, then we need to move in that direction. My hope remains that people will eat mostly plants, but for the die-hards, let's grow it in a lab or produce it with plants in whatever way we need to.

Are you concerned that the "veggie burger" phenomena keeps people thinking that we still need burgers instead of pointing them in the more positive direction of whole, natural foods?

No. My feeling is that when you grow up eating a certain way, there's some comfort in that, and if we can provide foods that are familiar and comfortable, people will be more apt to stick with it and be happy and not

revert. Of course, we want to make it as healthy as possible, but I don't think it's a terrible thing to offer a burger made with black beans, quinoa, and grated carrots, even if we make it more like the old-fashioned burger. In short, if it's not made from a cow, I think it serves a purpose.

It is also useful when kids go to scout camp and everybody else has a burger or a hotdog; it's nice to be able to have some sort of plant-based substitute so they can feel like they're part of the tribe.

One thing that has distinguished the leading plant-based advocates from the NHA is the NHA's advocacy of a diet urging the avoidance of added salt, oil and sugars; what Alan Goldhamer describes as "vegan SOS-free." Are you part of that same camp?

I'm close. I certainly agree where oil and sugar are concerned. My feeling is that we should get our fat from whole foods, predominantly from nuts, seeds, avocados and the like. I also feel that we should get our sugar from fruit and in the whole form. However, when it comes to salt, I still think it's reasonable to have moderate amounts, keeping intake to not more than 2300 mg per day for active individuals and 1500 mg per day for those at risk for disease. Having a little bit of tamarind or coconut aminos to enhance the flavor might make a lot of people more willing to consume the food we recommend. To me,

oil is to the fat world what sugar is to the carbohydrate world. Both offer a lot of calories with very few nutrients. Of course, overall, we're better off minimizing or avoiding all three of those things—salt, oil and sugar—and sticking with whole foods as much as possible.

It seems we no longer hear much about raw foods in the current whole-food, plant-based world, where so much of the attention is on gourmet vegan cooking. Do you think a majority of a plant-based diet should be raw fruits and vegetables?

Yes. There are several advantages to including more raw foods in your diet. One is that the concentration of the components that are super protective to human health are higher. Both phytochemicals and antioxidants are higher when fruits and vegetables are consumed raw. And when we cook foods, we can produce potentially damaging byproducts of oxidation, particularly if we use dry heat. Some foods do need to be cooked, however, such as legumes (smaller ones such as lentils can also be sprouted). When we cook foods, it should be with as little heat as possible. Steaming or some other sort of moist cooking method is preferable. Of course, our intake of cooked foods will naturally increase in the very cold months

because we want warmer foods. But even then, a significant portion of each meal should still be raw.

I think Joel Fuhrman likes to say, “Your salad should be your main course.” Do you agree with him about that?

Yes, I do. I have one huge meal a day and it is a giant salad with all of the trimmings.

Earlier you spoke positively about the healthy fats that we derive from consuming avocados, nuts, and seeds. That appears to be an area of some disagreement, or at least debate, among leading authorities in the whole-food, plant-based movement. I think Dr. Fuhrman argues that these are essential, not only for heart health but for long-term brain health, while others, like Dr. Esselstyn, express concern that “fat is fat” and that even whole-food fats can clog your arteries or make it more difficult to clear them, and urges that we need to severely limit the amount we consume. Where do you come down on this?

I come down very strongly in the Joel Fuhrman camp, although I have great respect for Dr. Esselstyn; his diet has proven to reverse severe coronary artery disease. But we have to understand that our brain is mainly fat, as is every single membrane of every cell in the body. The fat in those membranes determines the shape, permeability, flexibility, and cell signaling ability; for all of those things we need fat. Saying that nuts, seeds and avocados are potentially dangerous because they are high in fat is something we know to be not true. The scientific studies are clear that these foods are protective.

Again, if you take a look at the Blue Zones, the percentage of calories from fat ranges from 6-11% in Okinawa to about 50% in Ikaria, Greece. It is a 20-30% in other Blue Zones, averaging about 25% overall. What matters more than the percent of calories from fat is the source of that fat. When fats come from whole plant foods, they are loaded with fiber, phytochemicals, antioxidants, plant sterols and stanols, vitamin E, and many other vitamins and minerals. These substances are consistently protective to health.

The main research we have suggesting the positive benefits of eliminating those foods are the studies of



Brenda with Dr. Joel Fuhrman and Margie Colclough, who has assisted Brenda in the Marshall Islands.

“We don’t need a lot of nuts, seeds and avocados, but including them judiciously in the diet makes so much sense.”

protective phytochemicals and antioxidants that are naturally very high in these foods. These whole-food fats also enhance the absorption of so many nutrients that are fat-soluble. We don’t want to minimize our absorption of those things, we want to maximize it. To do so, we need at least 15% of calories from fat, in my view. However, it is possible that to reverse plaque, fat does need to be 10% or less; we just don’t know for sure.

Isn’t there also a satiety aspect to this discussion? If you follow a whole-food, plant-based diet without avocado, nuts, and other healthy fats, might it be hard to sustain the diet and lifestyle?

Absolutely, especially if you’re an active person. I would add that just because something works to reverse heart disease in an individual, doesn’t make it the gold standard for children or for athletes, seniors, or for people who have a difficult time absorbing nutrients. We need to really think about our individual needs through the course of our lifecycle. Additionally, people who tend to have a harder time losing weight may need to consume less fat while people who have a hard time keeping weight on may need to consume more. Young children need more fat. We don’t need a lot of nuts, seeds and avocados, but including them judiciously in the diet makes so much sense.

For as long as I’ve been on the scene, there seems to have developed a pretty strong consensus that for vegans, vitamin B-12 needs to be supplemented, but when it comes to other vitamins, like vitamin D, omega-3, and DHA-EPA, opinions are not so universal. What is your view of the need for supplementation?

Well, I definitely agree on the B-12. It's an essential nutrient without which we would die.

If that is the case, how did our ancestors get B-12 before it was available as supplements?

It was actually pretty easy. B-12 is made from bacteria, so whenever our ancestors ate insects, meat, or plants pulled right from the ground, near where animals had been walking, they ingested a little bit of bacteria. And a little bit is all you really need. However, in today's environment we're really careful with sanitation. Now, we make a conscious effort to keep pathogenic bacteria out of our food.

The Institute of Medicine recommends that everybody over age 50 not rely on animal products for B-12, because in animal products the B-12 is bound to protein and we have to be able to cleave it off the protein in order to absorb it. As you get older, your ability to produce the enzymes, and to have the level of hydrochloric acid in your stomach needed to do that, diminishes. So, the Institute of Medicine states that everybody over age 50 should get their B-12 from fortified foods or supplements, the same place vegans get it.

What about vitamin D?

It depends on your age, the color of your skin, and your exposure to the sun. The key is whether or not you have the ability to make enough vitamin D from the sun; and there are a lot of reasons why you might not. Being overweight, living so far north that you're not exposed to warm sunshine during a big part of the year, covering your skin, and having very dark skin are things that may, and often do, affect your ability to produce vitamin D. For people who aren't producing enough, they need to take a supplement. I live in Canada, so I take a supplement during the winter months when the sun is in limited supply. I actually just had my vitamin D tested a few weeks ago and it was just where I want it.

What about DHA and EPA?

We don't know. Basically, what we do know is that these are incredibly important fats, and the levels in vegans are commonly around 30–40% that of omnivores. On the positive side, vegans do tend to maintain their DHA status over time. Based on research to date, it does make



Brenda getting a dose of Vitamin D

“DHA and EPA are made by plants in the ocean, so we can culture those plants without all the mercury and dioxins.”

sense to ensure good essential fatty acid status, and taking EPA and DHA will help boost levels.

Are there natural sources of these substances?

DHA and EPA are made by plants in the ocean, so we can culture those plants without all the mercury and dioxins, and it's available in supplement form. We don't have to rape the oceans to get it and we don't have to kill fish to extract their oils. We can just take it from microalgae, which is exactly where the fish get it from.

Are you confident in the current science that tells us what levels we should be getting and what the consequences of not doing so would be?

It's a bit of a crapshoot right now because we don't know exactly how much we need. But we know that we have much higher needs during pregnancy and lactation, and that we convert more efficiently at those times. However, because of the essentiality of DHA, especially for brain development, I think bringing levels up during pregnancy makes sense.

In your experience as a dietitian, are you confident about the quality and reliability of vegan supplements on the market?

I would say yes, although this is not my area of expertise. I know that there are some very good supplements out there, and I think people like Joel Fuhrman are very careful in terms of selection.

What about multivitamins? Do we need to ensure that we are getting all the important vitamins and minerals by taking a supplement?

If we follow a good diet, we should be able to get most of what we need with the exceptions of B-12 and possibly vitamin D, iodine (unless you're using some seaweed), and possibly essential fatty acids. A good plant food diet should provide what you need. Having said that, a decent multivitamin is not a bad choice for people who aren't doing the best of job with their diet.

It sounds like you are more aligned with the T. Colin Campbell Whole school, which I believe argues that if we



Brenda with Dr. T. Colin Campbell and Dr. Hans Diehl.

consume a varied whole-food, plant-based diet, we're going to do pretty well.

Absolutely, no question.

In the decades that you have been studying and writing about nutrition, are you more convinced that the epidemics of heart disease, diabetes, and cancer simply need not exist if people would adopt a whole-food, plant-based diet?

Yes, and I can't say it strongly enough! It almost brings me to tears thinking about it, because close to 90% of these diseases are entirely preventable. It breaks my heart when I see people I love who are dying of diseases that need never occur.

The thing that amazes me the most is how fast the body starts to rebuild itself when we simply change our diet. I'm so encouraged every time I see someone turning their life around. It brings more joy to my heart than just about anything I can think of. I love to give people that kind of hope, and the hope is real because I see disease reversals over and over again. Even where cancer is concerned, while there is no guarantee of reversal, where diet is concerned, eating whole foods that are plant-based appears to provide the best chance of survival. I love what Dr. Esselstyn often says: "Everything you put into your mouth is either like pouring gasoline on a

fire or pouring water on a fire."

We are so lucky that we have the choice. I've done a lot of work in the Marshall Islands, where they have among the highest rates of diabetes in the world, and they don't have the choices we have here in North America. Their produce is very expensive and they've hardly got any land to grow food, and they're very poor; and yet they are making positive choices that are producing positive results. We can learn so much from them.

I read that that you're doing some work with the government of Lithuania, which is trying to make nationwide change in their health practices.

Yes, it's just so exciting what's happening in that country. Dr. John Kelly, who is the founding president of the



American College of Lifestyle Medicine, and I went over last year and attended a lifestyle intervention for the government and some medical schools, and they were very interested in what we had to say. In fact, their medical school has created a three-month elective in lifestyle medicine and their school of public health has

a Master's Degree program in lifestyle medicine. The government is so interested that they're creating positions for the graduates.

Are they doing this out of progressive thinking or as a way of actually attack the costs of health care?

It's a combination of both. I think they're finally understanding that so many diseases really are preventable with lifestyle changes.

Let's talk about the many books you have written. How many have you authored?

I've written 10 books, and I'm in the middle of my 11th right now!

Is there one book that best distills your recommendations for healthy living?

I would say *Becoming Vegan: Comprehensive Edition: The Complete Reference to Plant-Based Nutrition*. It is a



L to R: Professor Algimantas Kirkutis, Chairman of the Health Committee in Lithuanian Parliament, Brenda, and Dr. John Kelly, the founding president of the American College of Lifestyle Medicine, all of whom conducted the first Lifestyle Medicine Intervention in the EU.

very complete guide on plant-based eating. But from a practical point of view, my newest book, *The Kick Diabetes Cookbook*, is wonderful. It's not just about diabetes, it offers everyday recipes that I use all the time (with no oil, no sugar, and only minimal salt as an option). It's a wonderful guide for people who want to shift to a healthy plant-based diet.



Vesanto Melina, at left, Brenda's writing partner.

Isn't it amazing that although many people turn to plant-based diets because of a specific condition, like diabetes, they find that the diet also helps reverse or improve many other conditions?

I love the way you said that, because the reality is that it's not one diet to reverse or prevent diabetes and another for heart disease, or arthritis or cancer; it's one diet that cuts across all of these diseases and is optimal for reducing risk of all chronic diseases. It's also the best for the environment and one that promotes kindness to animals. There are so many reasons to move in this direction.

And it's pretty good for the planet as well, right?

Yes. Thirty years ago I would have never expected we would be where we are today. In fact, I didn't think we would be this far in my lifetime. I am very encouraged to see the transformation, even within my own profession.

If we look at the 2016 position statement of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, it's very positive in terms of plant-based diets being appropriate for every stage of the lifecycle, including 100% plant-based diets. It's amazing to think back to when I started as a dietitian; I had only learned two things about plant-based diets: that vegetarian diets were risky, and that vegan diets were downright dangerous. So, we've come a long way.

Did you ever think that you would see documentaries like *Forks Over Knives*, *Food Choices*, and *What the Health* readily

Do you have a private practice where you provide nutritional counseling?

I usually refer people to my writing partner, Vesanto Melina. I do a little bit of counseling, but I'm very selective, mainly because I just don't have a lot of time. I am, however, starting to think about developing some retreats like so many others in my field have. My goal would be to work with people for seven to ten days and put them through a very intense learning experience about plant-based nutrition.



"It's not one diet to reverse or prevent diabetes and another for heart disease, or arthritis or cancer; it's one diet that cuts across all of these."

Our mutual friend, Dr. Michael Klaper, has a wonderful moniker: "It's the Food!" Do you agree with that, or do you think there are other lifestyle factors that are just as important?

I love Dr. Klaper, and that line is pure genius. But, of course, we need to have a very holistic approach to health, which includes fitness. Our bodies need to move, and when we move, this

gives our bones the signals they need to stay strong. Fitness also keeps our heart healthy. I recommend that people move for at least an hour a day. I also think we need to take care of our dental health, get sufficient sleep, and include stress management in our daily lives. Finally, we need to make time for the people we love—this is critical to both health and happiness. All of these things are important in addition to the food we eat.

You sound like you're one of the founders of the Natural Hygiene Movement!

available on major media platforms like Netflix?

For me, it's just like Christmas! It's so exciting to see this stuff coming out on a regular basis. The documentaries are getting better and better. It's also encouraging that we have the Internet, where people can be exposed to this diet and lifestyle on a different scale than they could have 30 years ago.

They were right!

Speaking of people that we love, tell me about your husband, Paul, and what he does.

Paul and I have been married for 40 years. He just retired this year after a career in occupational hygiene. He served as a senior regional officer for our governmental regulatory body for health and safety.

It sounds like you've been blessed to be joined by your husband in your plant-based journey.

I truly have. He has always been encouraging of my work. I do an awful lot of traveling that has required him to be on his own a lot, but it's been a blessing because we're always excited to see one another when I come home!

I understand you're going to be one of the featured speakers on the 2019 Holistic Holiday at Sea Cruise.

Yes, I am! I'm very excited because it will be my first time, and I will be sharing the platform with some very dear friends, like Drs. Klaper, Esselstyn, Greger and Campbell.

And you'll be able to get plenty of free vitamin D.

Oh, I'm looking forward to that!



Brenda with her husband, Paul

What do you do for fun, when you're not writing books, lecturing around the world, and traveling to the Marshall Islands and Lithuania?


My hobbies mostly surround fitness. I love to bike, run, and take all the classes at my gym. I also cross-country ski, swim, and canoe. I love being outdoors and close to nature. I also like to do a little gardening, though I am a beginner.

I don't consider myself a particularly spiritual person, and I don't meditate or do yoga, but when I'm in the garden picking strawberries or cherry tomatoes, I find something very spiritual about that. Do you have the

same experience?

I do yoga, but do not meditate either. I actually live a few steps from a large park with trails everywhere, and for me that's my stress management and my joy.

It's been wonderful talking to you. I can't believe it's taken this long for the two of us to meet! You are a remarkable person and one of the really true-blue people I've come across.

I so appreciate that Mark. Thank you so much, and thank you for the wonderful work that you are doing to make this world a healthier, more compassionate place. 

Hope for the future...

Where there's a will, there's a way.

Many of our friends have helped preserve the legacy of "Health through Healthful Living" for future generations through bequests to the National Health Association.

A large number of people do not have wills, and there are many others who may consider updating their wills because of sweeping changes in tax laws in recent years. Bequests are important sources of support for our future achievements and goals.

The following format, at right, may be used by those who wish to make a bequest to NHA:

"I am committed to 'Health through Healthful Living.' Therefore, I give the National Health Association, a 501(c)(3) non-profit education corporation presently with headquarters in Youngstown, Ohio, the sum of (\$ _____), and/or other specifically described property free of all death taxes, creditors' claims, and expenses of administration of my estate, for discretionary use in carrying out this aim and purpose."

The total dollar value of a bequest to NHA is deductible for Federal estate tax purposes. You can consult with your attorney about the procedure for naming NHA in your will or you can contact the Association.

Contact:
Mark Huberman, President
P.O. Box 477
Youngstown, OH 44501

Phone: (330) 953-1002
Fax: (330) 953-1030

E-Mail: info@healthscience.org