

# A Whole New Person

A ONE-MONTH EXPERIMENT BECOMES A LIFE-CHANGING PATH TO WELLNESS

by Rachel Echols

I grew up eating the standard American diet, which I never questioned. I was thin until I got married and had two children. I was always looking for the next best diet, and I tried many. Sometimes I lost weight, but I was always hungry and regained it, plus more. As I got older, I experienced frequent migraines, addictions and cravings, insomnia, snoring, and high cholesterol. I was an emotional eater. If there were sweets anywhere in the house, they never lasted long around me.

I have always worried about getting diabetes. My maternal grandmother had diabetes, and I remember she wasn't allowed to eat fruit. By the time I was 12, my mother had developed diabetes; later both of my sisters and my father also developed it, as well as many of my aunts and uncles. My weight continued to increase, and I wondered how long it would be before I became diabetic. It was never a question of if, but when.

I was raised in a religious household and have always been a spiritual person. I believed that God would not approve of what I had been putting my body through, so I eventually decided to give up on diets until I found a way to lose weight and become healthy in a sustainable way. I knew that God had an answer for me, but until I discovered it, I knew I couldn't continue yo-yo dieting and being disappointed. I kept searching for an answer to my problem and said many heartfelt prayers that a solution would make itself known to me, but otherwise I went on with my life.

After many years of being a stay-at-home mom, I ended up starting pharmacy school

at the age of 40. My weight problem continued to get worse. By the time I graduated and began my career as a pharmacist with a specialty in geriatrics, I had gained another 35 pounds. A visit to my doctor revealed I was obese, with a BMI of 37, and my cholesterol was 260. My doctor sent me home with resources to help me with lifestyle changes, and a warning that I might need to start a statin for my cholesterol. Remarkably, she told me to eat no animal products and to start a whole-food, plant-based diet. I do not remember a doctor ever telling me that before. I had no idea what a whole-food, plant-based diet was, but I was intrigued. I ended up watching *Forks Over Knives*, and I truly had an epiphany while watching it! It sounded like the healthiest thing out there. But was I capable of doing it and making it sustainable? I decided to experiment for one month, and so, I jumped in! I started on January 15, 2019, at 46 years old.

I transitioned from the standard American diet to eating about 95% whole-food, plant-based in around three days. I ate lots of side dishes (without butter and dairy) and skipped the meat. I ate raw vegetables, whole-grain bread, and fresh fruit. I did a lot of research and quickly found how to replace meat and cheese in traditional dishes. Eliminating oil took some time. The first few weeks I had to white-knuckle my way through cravings and addictions, so I ate a lot, which helped keep me satisfied. In the first month, I lost 14 pounds and felt better than I had in a very long time. My migraines lessened and my sleep improved. At the end of that month, I knew I could never go back to eating the way I used to!



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By September 2019, I had lost 50 pounds and was feeling like a whole new person! I continued to read and study. I read *The Starch Solution* by John McDougall, *How to Prevent and Reverse Heart Disease* by Dr. Caldwell Esselstyn, and Dr. Neal Barnard's *Program for Reversing Diabetes*. I collected recipes and was learning how to be a pretty good plant-based cook.

That fall my weight plateaued. I was still at least 20 pounds overweight. After learning about calorie density, I started on Dr. John McDougall's Maximum Weight Loss Program in January 2020. I joined the McDougall forums, where they have a Maximum Weight Loss thread with helpful moderators. Getting a little stricter with my



diet seemed hard at first, but participating in the forums helped me tremendously. I reported my compliance to the program guidelines plus my weekly weight loss on Fridays. The accountability I found there helped me immeasurably, and I began losing weight again. I did this consistently for 10 months, losing another 30+ pounds, at which time I was 10 pounds below my goal.

As of this writing, I have been living this lifestyle for three years. I am down a total of 90 pounds from my highest weight, and my cholesterol has dropped 105 points to 155. My A1c dropped from 5.4 to 4.8, and I no longer worry about getting diabetes. My BMI has been holding steady at 23 for the past 18 months. I exercise five to six days a week, doing both cardio and strength training. I love my daily five-mile walks and hiking in the woods with my camera. This past year I have seen my fitness increase greatly. I even achieved a 10-minute plank in 2021! My weight-loss story was picked up by a national magazine, and I had a photo shoot with a professional photographer and makeup artist.

Every single day is an opportunity to eat well and get stronger and more fit. I do not battle food addictions and emotional eating any longer. This lifestyle has somehow cured me of all the problems with food that I used



to struggle with. I love trying new recipes and experimenting in the kitchen and have started growing some of my own food.

As happens to most people who discover the amazing healing effects of a whole-food, plant-based lifestyle, I want to share the message. I work full-time and am very busy, but I love to use social media in spare moments every day to show how a plant-based lifestyle can change your health and help the environment and the animals, all while being colorful and delicious. I am active in many Facebook groups, like Forks Over Knives, Well Your World, The Jaroudi Family, McDougall Success Stories, etc. I try to answer people's questions and encourage them. On my personal Facebook page, I have a public photo album where I post pictures of the food I'm eating with the recipes attached. I post the link to this album on social media pages when people ask. It shows a variety of healthy, colorful, and delicious foods. I also post weight-loss tips, information about calorie density, stories from people who have regained their lives with this lifestyle, items about health and wellness, and inspirational quotes. Both friends and strangers send me messages and ask me questions. People who have known me for years have told me that I am glowing, reversing aging, or just look

amazing. They always want to know what I've been doing! I am influencing many to eat healthier, even when they aren't willing to consider a complete lifestyle change, and a few of my family members and friends have started a plant-based diet. I enjoy busting myths about this lifestyle and showing people how health-promoting and sustainable it can be.

After following McDougall's Maximum Weight Loss program for so many months, as well as living in a household where I am the only plant-based eater, I feel that I have a special understanding of the challenges people face when trying to start this healthy lifestyle or lose weight. There are a few nuances to calorie density that most people don't understand and which I enjoy sharing. I believe that making small changes and sticking with them every day produces incredible results down the road. I continue to read and study every chance I get. I have discovered that sticking with the lifestyle 100% is easier than anything less. The outward changes in me reflect an inner change in my attitude, dedication, confidence, and ability to tackle problems in all areas of my life. This seems to be a common theme: others have told me they, too, are more at peace, more compassionate, and more mindful after changing to a healthy diet.

In June 2022, I am looking forward to attending my first NHA conference. I am lucky that the conference is held in my home state of Ohio. I have been an NHA member for a year and always enjoy the *Health Science* magazines. They are a tool I use to continue learning every day. I can't wait to meet all the amazing people involved with the NHA and to continue to be inspired.

If anyone had told me five years ago that I would eventually eliminate all animal and processed foods from my diet, I would not have believed them. For me, it is a testament of the power of the human spirit and our ability to change and excel. Although some people may think that adopting this lifestyle is difficult, I do not feel any deprivation whatsoever. I can honestly say I love my life and enjoy my food more than ever before. My success has motivated me to help others, so I started a plant-based support group. If you'd like to join with others for encouragement, inspiration, and motivation, please join us on Facebook at Rachel's Plant-Powered Lifestyle Support Group. 🌱