

Dietitian, Heal Thyself!

by Linda Ayotte

I had been overweight since childhood. I topped out at 220 pounds in my late 20s and early 30s. I was living in Santa Rosa at the time and heard Dr. John McDougall speak—and I know the truth when I hear it! I immediately attempted to adopt his diet, but I struggled. The smart way to adopt this lifestyle may be quickly and perfectly, but that is not my story.

After years of all-or-nothing thinking with little to show for it, I decided to try a new approach. I would try to eat more of the good stuff and less of the bad stuff. I gave up meat first and then dairy. I liked stringing days together into a streak that supported my health and fitness goals. How many days can I go without meat? After a few false starts, it's now been 17 years. How many days can I go without dairy? (Now, *that* was hard!) I am currently at 10 years. I don't ever want to start counting from day one again, so I am pretty sure those changes are permanent!

Eliminating dairy was a game changer. So many unhealthy things are eliminated when you give up dairy. Unfortunately, vegan cupcakes exist. I tell my clients I'm a smart girl and I know three cupcakes in a row is a bad idea, but after I have the first one, I think just one more won't hurt. Next thing you know I'm coming up with an excuse to drive an hour to Santa Rosa for shopping, and, of course, while I am there I might as well stop by the cupcake shop. So, three years ago, I accepted the fact that I needed to give up vegan baked goods. I tell my clients, "Figure out which foods hijack your brain and come up with alternatives." Chef AJ's recipes have been so helpful for this. I don't know if I could have done it without her cranberry-pumpkin muffin recipe!

My diet continues to evolve and improve. I am so grateful to the NHA for establishing clear guidance as to what the target is. Every year I am closer to the target.

When I first learned about the NHA, I felt like I had found my people. I attended my first NHA conference in 2017. It was wonderful to be surrounded by people that not only shared my views on nutrition, but also my views on sleep and exercise.

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I am a registered dietitian and a certified diabetes educator. For over 20 years, I have been working at my dream job of helping people improve or reverse their diabetes. With my history, I also have a knack for helping people permanently lose weight. Nothing is more fun than helping people get their health back! Just when I thought things couldn't get better, an amazing young lifestyle medicine doctor moved to town and started a multidisciplinary lifestyle medicine program. I can't believe we have a program like this in our small rural community and that I get to be a part of it!

Exercise has always been important to me. Even when I was at my heaviest, I always worked out. I am a living example that you can exercise like crazy and still struggle until you get the nutrition right. At this stage of life, I joke that I am in training for old age. For my 60th birthday, I decided to make a couple of fitness goals. In our small town, there is a giant "U" at the top of a mountain. It is a rite of passage to hike up to the "U," and I had made a few failed attempts as a teenager but had never reached it. For my 60th birthday, though, I hiked up there with my family, and I made



it this time! My second goal was doing the full splits, another thing that I had never done. I decided if I worked at it every day, I could make it happen. And now, mission accomplished!

My family has also transitioned to a whole-food, plant-based diet. We are a rare three-generation plant-based family. My father played some of his best tennis in his 80s. My 88-year-old mother and I attend Zumba every week. She also does line dancing and works out at the gym regularly with my bonus dad. My 24-year-old daughter adopted a plant-based diet at 14 years old and is the best cook in the family.

One of the best things about this lifestyle is the ability to live your life fully. When my sisters invited me to do a half marathon with them in June, I did not have to think twice. We had so much fun that we plan to make it a yearly event. Throughout this process I have managed to lose over 80 pounds and reverse my prediabetes. I can't imagine ever going back to my old lifestyle!

I so appreciate the NHA. I always look forward to the magazine and can't wait to attend another conference. Mark and Wanda made me feel like part of the NHA family from day one, and I truly appreciate and admire both of them. 🌱

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