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Turning over a new leaf

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Change the way you eat (Clockwise from above) Green Goddess smoothie, Kidney bean curry, Mallika Sherawat and Amala Akkineni

TREND Want to join the vegan movement? Kickstart handholds you through 21 days of nutritious and varied vegan meals

Ever considered turning vegetarian? Or experimenting with veganism? Try the 'Vegan Kickstart' — a programme that handholds you through 21 days of interesting, nutritious and varied vegan meals.

The free online nutritional programme is pioneered by the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine (PCRM), a non-profit organisation headquartered in Washington, D.C. Ulka Agarwal, chief medical officer at the PCRM says they came up with Kickstart to show that eating a plant-based diet for just three weeks can result in significant health benefits. She adds, "Kickstart India is short enough so that anyone can test-drive it, but long enough to see results... So far about 3,200 people have signed up for the June programme and around 10,000 people signed up for our November Kickstart."

Kickstart India began this month, and will be live till the end of July. PCRM runs this programme twice a year in India, China, and three times a year in the U.S.

Although about 40 per cent of India is vegetarian, Dr. Agarwal says this programme is important because, according to their figures, close to 30 per cent of India is either overweight or obese. "Type 2 diabetes affects more than 50 million Indians... As a physician, I'm alarmed by the climbing diabetes rates, which surpasses the U.S. Blindness, amputations, and loss of kidney function go hand-in-hand with Type 2 diabetes."

Stating that "Indians consume a lot of milk and milk products which could be responsible for the country's above-average rates of diabetes and rising obesity," she says dairy product consumption in India is expected to double over the next decade.

Still need convincing? "During this test-drive, people typically lose a pound each week. They also see their cholesterol and blood pressure levels plummet. Health of people with diabetes improves dramatically. Migraines and pain often vanish. This diet is very low in saturated fat and virtually cholesterol-free diet, yet full of fibre and antioxidants." Dr. Agarwal says it's not as tough as it seems. "Non-vegetarians have actually found the transition very easy. Many people report that their taste-buds change after three weeks. They no longer crave certain foods such as meat, sugar, and cheese. They feel healthier, thinner, and more energetic... Menu items include chai, mint biryani with roasted mushrooms, aloo gobi, herb roti, and tamarind chutney. This is not a deprivation diet."

Here's an additional incentive. Mallika Sherawat will be one of your coaches. She says she transitioned to a vegan diet for better health, as well as the good of the environment. "I was surprised at how easy it was! There are so many delicious options to choose from. I pay attention to healthy, plant-based foods in their natural state. I also opt for ancient grains, such as quinoa and barley. They're less acidic than refined wheat and packed with protein and fibre."

She adds, "I always load up with leafy greens, like green juice, in the morning... All you need is a cup or two of spinach or kale, an apple, parsley, and a few celery stalks. Mix it in a blender and you're good to go! You don't need to add milk or dairy." Just back from Cannes, she says being vegan is what helps her deal with her hectic lifestyle. "I love my lifestyle and thrive on clean energy..."

As a coach for the 21-Day Vegan Kickstart, Sherawat will be sharing her favourite recipes and health tips with Kickstarters. Other coaches include Maneka Gandhi, Jackie Shroff, Alicia Silverstone, Shashi Tharoor and Amala Akkineni.

Akkineni says she started on a plant-based diet out of compassion for animals. "Increased energy and improved digestion are two of the biggest health benefits I've experienced. I never realised I was lactose intolerant until I eliminated dairy from my diet."

She recommends changing the way you eat by changing how you cook. "Prepare wonderful meals by making simple adjustments to your favourite dishes. Or branch out and find new foods that fit with your current lifestyle. I love loading my favourite staples — pizza and pasta — with fresh vegetables, like tomatoes, broccoli, and eggplant. I love using alternatives to cheese such as humus or tahini paste. I love salads so I fill them with sprouts of various kinds, nuts and vegetables. When I'm feeling adventurous I experiment with ancient grains, such as quinoa and millet, or leafy greens, such as bok choy and kale, mushrooms, which are packed with fibre and bold flavour. These foods are light, full of nutrients and easy to incorporate into juices, wraps, or main entrées."

Join the movement at <http://www.21daykickstartindia.org/>

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