

# EAT PLANTS FEEL WHOLE

## Weekly Health Digest

July 12, 2026 | Plant-Based Eating & Brain Health

**Article:** Associations between Plant-Based Dietary Patterns and Risks of Cognitive Impairment and Dementia: A Systematic Review and Dose-Response Meta-Analysis

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### What Did Scientists Study?

Researchers wanted to know: can eating more plants protect your brain as you age? They gathered results from 7 large studies that followed over 221,000 people. They looked at whether those who ate more plant-based foods were less likely to develop dementia or cognitive impairment.

### Why Does It Matter?

More than 55 million people worldwide live with dementia. Right now, there is no cure. That makes prevention the most powerful tool we have. We eat three meals a day — and every meal is a chance to either protect or harm our brain. If the food we choose can reduce our risk of memory loss by even 25%, that is worth knowing.

But here is the catch: not all plant foods are equal. This study made a careful distinction between healthy plant foods and unhealthy ones. That difference changed everything.

### What Did They Find?

People who followed the healthiest plant-based diets were 26% less likely to develop cognitive impairment or dementia compared to those who followed them the least. That is a meaningful, real-world difference across a group of over 221,000 people.

The researchers scored people's diets using three measures:

**PDI (Plant Diet Index)** — tracks how much someone eats from all plant food groups. Higher scores were tied to lower dementia risk.

**hPDI (Healthful Plant Diet Index)** — focuses on the most nutritious plant foods: vegetables, whole fruits, legumes, whole grains, nuts, and healthy oils. Eating more of these was strongly linked to lower brain disease risk.

**uPDI (Unhealthful Plant Diet Index)** — tracks plant foods that are not actually good for you: white bread, white rice, fruit juice, sugary drinks, sweets, and salty snacks. Eating more of these was tied to higher dementia risk.

The bottom line from the data: eating a bag of chips and a soda instead of a steak does NOT protect your brain. The quality of plant foods matters just as much as eating them at all.

## What Can You Do?

You do not need to overhaul your entire diet overnight. Just shift your plate a little more toward these brain-protecting foods every day:

### Fill half your plate with these:

Leafy greens (spinach, kale, arugula, Swiss chard) · Colorful vegetables (peppers, broccoli, beets, carrots) · Whole fruits (berries, apples, oranges — not juice) · Legumes (beans, lentils, chickpeas, edamame)

### Make these your grains:

Oats · Quinoa · Brown rice · Whole wheat bread or pasta (not white)

### Add these regularly:

Walnuts and almonds · Flaxseeds and chia seeds · Olive oil · Avocado

### Limit these plant foods that raise risk:

Sugary drinks and fruit juice · White bread and white rice · Packaged snacks and sweets · Ultra-processed 'plant-based' products

## Bottom Line

**Eating more whole, healthy plant foods may protect your brain from dementia — and cutting back on the junk versions of 'plant' food may matter just as much.**

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## Definitions

**Dementia:** A general term for conditions that cause the brain to stop working normally over time. Memory loss, confusion, and trouble with everyday tasks are common signs. Alzheimer's disease is the most common type. There is currently no cure.

**Cognitive Impairment:** When a person has more trouble thinking, remembering, or making decisions than is normal for their age. It can range from mild (noticeable but not disabling) to severe (dementia).

**Plant Diet Index (PDI):** A scoring tool researchers use to measure how plant-based a person's diet is overall. Higher scores mean more plant foods and less animal products.

**Healthful Plant Diet Index (hPDI):** A scoring tool that gives positive points only for nutritious plant foods — vegetables, whole fruits, legumes, whole grains, nuts, and vegetable oils. A high hPDI means a truly health-promoting plant-based diet.

**Unhealthful Plant Diet Index (uPDI):** A scoring tool that gives positive points for low-quality plant foods — white bread, white rice, fruit juices, sugary drinks, sweets, and salty snacks. A high uPDI was linked to higher dementia risk in this study.

**Legumes:** A family of plants whose seeds grow in pods — beans, lentils, chickpeas, peas, and edamame. Rich in fiber, protein, and minerals, and among the most brain-protective foods in this study.

**Meta-Analysis:** A study that pools results from many separate studies and analyzes them together. By combining data from thousands of people, it gives more reliable answers than any single study can.

**Prospective Cohort Study:** Research where scientists enroll a large group of people, record their habits, and then follow them for years to see who develops a disease. One of the strongest ways to study long-term health effects.

**Risk Ratio (RR):** A number that compares the risk of a disease in two groups. An RR of 0.74 means one group had 26% lower risk. The lower the number below 1.0, the stronger the protection.

**Refined Carbohydrates:** Carbohydrate foods processed to remove fiber and nutrients. Examples: white bread, white rice, and packaged baked goods. In this study, eating more refined carbs was linked to higher dementia risk.

**Alzheimer's Disease:** The most common cause of dementia. A brain disease where abnormal proteins slowly destroy nerve cells, causing progressive memory loss and confusion. Affects about 6.7 million Americans.