

“A true road map for anyone who wants to apply
the food-as-medicine approach to their health.”

—WILLIAM W. LI, MD, AUTHOR OF *EAT TO BEAT DISEASE*

21 PRACTICAL PRINCIPLES
FOR RECLAIMING
YOUR HEALTH IN A
NUTRITIONALLY
CONFUSING WORLD

THE PEGAN DIET

PALEO + VEGAN = PEGAN

Mark Hyman, MD

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING
AUTHOR OF *FOOD*



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**21 PRACTICAL PRINCIPLES FOR
RECLAIMING YOUR HEALTH IN A
NUTRITIONALLY CONFUSING WORLD**

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LITTLE,
BROWN
SPARK

Introduction

Do we really need another diet book? No. Despite the title, the Pegan Diet is an un-diet—a simple set of principles blending science and common sense into guidelines promoting health, weight loss, and longevity that can easily be adapted to any philosophical or cultural preferences. What do we know about food? How do we know it? What conclusions can we draw from the data? How do we combine that with dietary, philosophical, social, and cultural preferences? As a physician on the front lines of the epidemic of chronic disease and obesity (one who has used food as the primary medicine in treating disease and optimization of health for 30 years), I am saddened by the diet wars and fad diets. Politics, religion, and nutrition are all equally polarizing.

The Pegan Diet started off as a joke. Years ago I sat on a nutrition panel at a conference between two friends—one doctor a Paleo proponent, and the other a vegan cardiologist. They argued vigorously for their points of view. To break the tension, I quipped, “Well, if you are Paleo and you are vegan, then I must be Pegan.” Thus it all began. As I started to think more deeply about what I had said as a joke, I realized that most dietary philosophies, including Paleo and vegan, had far more in common with one another than most people realize, and far, far more in common with one another than with the Standard American Diet, otherwise known as the SAD diet.

In fact, Paleo and vegan camps (if we stick to the best in both approaches) are identical except for one thing: where to get protein. Animal products or beans and grains? That’s it. Of course, you can be a chips and soda vegan, or a bacon and no veggies Paleo eater, but the best whole food expressions of each are so similar. Both promote a plant-rich whole foods diet; a diet low in starch and sugar, processed food, additives, hormones, antibiotics, GMOs; and, except for a small group of extreme low-fat vegan fans, a diet rich in good fats. They both even eschew dairy. And all the other dietary approaches—vegetarian, keto, time-restricted eating, lectin-free diets, Mediterranean, low-carb, low-fat, gluten-free, and more—mostly adhere to a whole foods

approach and remove harmful ultra-processed foods and include protective foods.

Perhaps the real focus should be on shifting people from an obesogenic, disease-causing, nutrient-depleted diet to one rich in whole foods and protective foods that promote weight loss, health, and well-being. That, my friends, is the goal of the Pegan Diet.

Why is this more important than ever? Our modern industrial diet is currently the biggest killer on the planet, exceeding smoking and every other cause. Conservatively our modern diet, rich in processed foods made from wheat (white flour), corn (high-fructose corn syrup and many industrial food additives), and soy (soybean oil), and lacking in protective, healing whole foods (fruits, vegetables, nuts, seeds, whole grains, beans, seafood, etc.), kills 11 million people a year. I believe that is a gross underestimate. Each year about 57 million people die around the world. Three-quarters of those deaths (or 42 million) are due to chronic diseases such as heart disease, diabetes, cancer, and dementia, mostly caused by poor diet. Even infectious diseases, like COVID-19, are more likely to sicken and kill those who are overweight or suffer from chronic disease. The costs are staggering. In the United States, the direct and indirect cost for chronic disease is projected to be \$95 trillion over the next 35 years, or about 1 in 5 dollars of our entire economy. Globally it's much more, and getting worse as we export our American diet to every part of the globe.

If we want to lower the total burden of chronic disease, survive another pandemic, save our planet and communities, and create a happier, less divided society, we have to overhaul the way that we grow, produce, distribute, and consume food around the world. We have to come together, stop the diet wars, and embrace the healing power of proper nutrition. That is why I wrote this book—to showcase the power of food and present an inclusive and sustainable food philosophy.

The Pegan Diet is unique in four ways. I'll cover each foundational principle next.

THE PEGAN DIET TREATS FOOD AS MEDICINE

The first foundation is this: *Food is medicine*, with both the power to heal and

the power to harm. The best strategy for a long and healthy life is to eat your medicine—get your drugs at the farmacy, not the pharmacy! Food is far more than just calories or energy to fuel our bodies. It is information, instructions that regulate every function of our bodies in real time. Remarkable discoveries over the last few decades now enable us to use food not just for pleasure, joy, connection, and nourishment but also for rejuvenation, thriving, and even reversing disease. Quality and nutrient density are foundational to building a thriving human community. Some suggest we should all be *nutrivores*, prioritizing nutrient density; others propose we become *qualitarians* and focus on quality, no matter what dietary philosophy we hold. One discovery embodied in the Pegan Diet is that we are all unique, not just in terms of our preferences but also in our biology. Our genetic and biochemical uniqueness can guide us toward *personalized nutrition*. Despite our personal beliefs, some may thrive on a vegan diet; others may wither. Some become superhuman on a Paleo diet, and others not so much. The key is to explore your biology, not stay fixed in a particular ideology.

We are just beginning to understand how food influences our cells, tissues, organs, moods, thoughts, feelings, and the structure of our bodies, but what scientists have discovered over the last few decades is astonishing. Food is not only a source of energy, joy, connection, and pleasure; it can also rejuvenate us and even reverse disease. When we think of food, we think of protein, carbohydrates, fats, fiber, vitamins, and minerals. But the most important parts of food may be the tens of thousands of medicinal compounds embedded in plants and even animal foods that regulate, modulate, and influence nearly all of the 37 billion billion chemical reactions that occur in our bodies every second. I call this process *symbiotic-phytoadaptation*. It means our bodies use chemicals found in food to beneficially influence each of our biological systems.

Through evolution, we have borrowed the molecular magic embedded in foods to optimize and supercharge our biology. For example, we can't synthesize vitamin C or omega-3 fats; we have to get these from nature. And it's not just the obvious essential fatty acids, amino acids, and vitamins and minerals we get from our food; we also get important molecules called phytochemicals.

There are 25,000-plus phytochemicals in the plant kingdom identified to date, and they've only recently been deemed critical for health. Surprisingly

they are also found in animals, such as in grass-fed cows, who consume a wide array of nutrient-dense plant foods. While deficiency of these phytochemicals may not result in an acute disease like scurvy or rickets or in protein malnutrition, it can lead to long-latency deficiency diseases such as heart disease, diabetes, hypertension, obesity, dementia, depression, and more.

The only way to take advantage of these disease-fighting compounds is to focus on our food quality. Deeply colorful plant foods, organic and grass-fed meats, and wild fatty fish are abundant in compounds that protect our cells and fight off invaders. If you eat industrial food, even vegetables, your diet will be depleted. Organic vegetables are more nutrient-dense. Factory-farmed cows fed a simplified diet of corn, cow poop, candy, and ground-up animal parts produce meat that leads to inflammation and disease. Wild elk or regeneratively raised cows that forage on dozens of medical plants produce meat that has the opposite effect.

Every time you take a bite of food, consider that you are programming your biology for health or disease. When you eat healthy food, you are, in fact, eating medicine.

THE PEGAN DIET IS BASED ON FUNCTIONAL MEDICINE

The greatest discovery of the last 50 years is that food is medicine with the power to prevent, treat, and even reverse most chronic disease (and quickly). This discovery is mostly ignored by traditional medicine. Is there an approach to medicine, disease treatment, and health creation that incorporates this new understanding? Yes. It is called *functional medicine*. It is what I have been practicing for nearly 30 years with remarkable, life-changing results. Functional medicine practitioners understand that what you put at the end of your fork is more powerful than anything you will ever find in a prescription bottle. It works faster, better, and cheaper, and all the side effects are good ones.

The body is a biological ecosystem, a network of dynamically interacting, interconnected systems. In conventional medicine they might say there's a problem with your heart, liver, brain, or colon, for example. Diseases within each organ are viewed as separate and disconnected from the rest of the body.