

The truth about plant-based burgers

Is vegan "meat" really healthier?



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You've seen them at the supermarket or at your local burger joint—plant-based patties engineered to resemble and taste like real meat. They're wildly popular with vegans and carnivores. But just how nutritious are these meatless burgers?

The plant-based advantage

To reap the heart-healthy, anticancer benefits of plant-based eating, you need to strategically replace red meat with the right kinds of plant-based foods—that is, whole, unprocessed, protein- and fiber-rich foods such as beans, legumes, nuts and seeds.

While the current crop of plant-based burgers is meatless and rich in protein, these burgers are also *ultra-processed*, formulated in a way that strips many naturally occurring nutrients and phytochemicals.

Meatless burgers also are surprisingly high in saturated fat, frequently using coconut oil to create faux marbling and enhance mouthfeel. Like many ultra-processed foods, they're also high in sodium—300 mg to 400 mg per four-ounce patty.

Plant burger match-up

If you are a meat eater and make your own burgers at home with ground beef (85% lean beef), you'll get about the same amount of saturated fat (6 g in a four-ounce serving) and approximately as much protein (21 g) as found in the meatless counterparts.

One big difference: This beef burger has 76 g of cholesterol, while the plant-based versions listed here have none.

Note: Some people are more sensitive to dietary cholesterol than others.

How the nutrition stacks up (based on a four-ounce serving) for three popular meatless burgers...

Impossible Burger may appeal to people who savor the taste of meat.

Base: Soy. *Fats:* Coconut and sunflower oils. *Nutritional breakdown:* 240 calories...14 g of fat (8 g saturated)...19 g of protein...3 g of fiber...370 mg of sodium.

Unique features: Tastes and "bleeds" like meat.

Fortified with 130% of the Daily Value (DV) for vitamin B-12 (found mainly in animal products)...25% of the DV for iron (helpful for plant-based eaters)...15% of the DV for calcium...and gluten-free.

Beyond Burger is a top pick for those who don't want a soy-based product.

Base: Pea protein, mung bean, fava bean, brown rice and sunflower. *Fats:* Coconut, sunflower and canola oils, and cocoa butter. *Nutritional breakdown:* 260 calories...18 g of fat (5 g saturated)...20 g of protein...2 g of fiber...350 mg of sodium.

Unique features: Beet juice extract offers a red, meatlike hue. Fortified with 20% of the DV for iron...8% of the DV for calcium...and gluten-free.

Awesome Burger is a good choice for people who want to get as much fiber as possible.

Base: Pea protein. *Fats:* Coconut and canola oils. *Nutritional breakdown:* 260 calories...15 g of fat (7 g

saturated)...26 g of protein...6 g of fiber...400 mg of sodium.

Unique features: The label claims it is "totally juicy." Fortified with 25% of the DV for iron and 15% of the DV for calcium. It contains gluten.

Virtues of the veggie burger

If you want an all-around healthier meat alternative and don't need it to taste or "bleed" like beef, you're better off with bean-based veggie patties. Most contain mainly vegetables, fiber-rich beans, grains and spices. Rather than a meaty flavor, these burgers taste more like beans and veggies with a spicy kick. The brands below are almost free of saturated fat. They're still considered processed foods so they have a fair amount of sodium, but the first several ingredients are whole and unprocessed (for example, carrots, onions, string beans and oat bran for Dr. Praeger's).

Caveat: This type of burger tends to have less than 2 g per serving of iron. To bump that up, layer on iron-rich dark, leafy greens and a few thick tomato slices (they're rich in vitamin C, which enhances iron absorption).

Amy's Organic Black Bean Veggie Burger is a smart choice for people who don't like the taste of meat.

Base: Vegetables, grains, black beans. *Fats:* Extra virgin olive oil...safflower and/or sunflower oil. *Nutritional breakdown (per 2.5-ounce patty):* 130 calories...4 g of fat (0.5 g saturated)...6 g of protein...3 g of fiber...300 mg of sodium...and contains gluten.

Dr. Praeger's California Veggie Burger appeals to bean/veggie lovers.

Base: Mix of vegetables and beans. *Fats:* Canola oil. *Nutritional breakdown (per 2.5-ounce patty):* 130 calories...6 g of fat (0.5 g saturated)...5 g of protein...5 g of fiber...250 mg of sodium...and contains gluten. (A gluten-free version is available.)

Bottom Line Health interviewed **Lisa Young, PhD, RDN**, adjunct professor of nutrition in the department of nutrition and food studies at New York University in New York City. She is the author of several books, including *Finally Full, Finally Slim: 30 Days to Permanent Weight Loss One Portion at a Time* and *The Portion Teller Plan: The No-Diet Reality Guide to Eating, Cheating, and Losing Weight Permanently*. DrLisaYoung.com