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## **COVID-19 Meat Shortages: Dietitian Offers Healthy Meat Alternatives**

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The temporary closure of meat packing plants due to COVID-19 outbreaks may result in meat shortages and analysts predict the challenges will continue as long as the pandemic does. Audra Wilson, MS, RD, LDN, bariatric dietitian at the Northwestern Medicine Metabolic Health and Surgical Weight Loss Center at Delnor Hospital, answers questions about healthy meat alternatives and if consuming less meat could be a positive change.



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### **What are good options to replace the nutrients from meat?**

Meat is a great source of protein and provides all of the essential amino acids. Most plant proteins are missing a few amino acids, making them incomplete proteins, but can be combined with other foods to consume all essential amino acids. Beans and rice are a popular pairing that when combined create a complete protein. However, soy protein, is a plant-based complete protein all on its own.

Meat products provide vitamin B12, iron, and zinc. Many soy products and meat alternatives, as well as cereals, are fortified with B12 but it is important to read labels to assess B12 content. The iron found in meat is called heme iron which is more readily absorbed in the body than the type of iron found in plants called non-heme iron. Including foods high in vitamin C with meat alternatives or other plant proteins can help boost iron absorption. Adding foods high in zinc like corn, oatmeal, fortified cereals, pumpkin seeds, lentils and chickpeas can help to meet daily zinc needs. For example, all of these nutrients could be provided in a fortified soy protein-based burger in a whole-wheat pita with tomatoes and chickpeas. The fortified soy burger would provide B12, the tomato vitamin C, and the chickpeas zinc. Also try to refrain from drinking tea and coffee with meals which can reduce iron absorption, as can calcium supplements.

### **If people enjoy the flavor, texture and taste of meat, what are good replacement options?**

Meat alternatives have come a long way! There are many options and most could easily be mistaken for meat in a recipe. Seitan is made from wheat gluten and has a chewy consistency similar to chicken, beef or pork. Beyond Meat and Impossible Burger both mimic the texture,

taste, and appearance of beef. Jackfruit – yes a fruit – can be used in a recipe to replace something like pulled pork or chicken as the texture is similar when shredded. Firm tofu can be marinated like meat to fit any style of cooking. There is even a tasty soy version of the spicy and flavorful, typically pork-based chorizo called soyrizo. Basically, if you have a recipe that calls for meat there is an easy, similarly flavored plant-based protein swap available. Don't forget vegetables like mushrooms, beans and legumes. Steak-like Portobello mushrooms can be roasted and served just like burgers and have a similar, meaty taste. Beans can be tossed into any salad or sauce for an instant filling protein and fiber boost. Legumes like lentils have endless cooking possibilities and pack a serious iron and protein punch.

### **Is eating less meat good for your diet?**

Creating more variety in your diet is always positive – more food diversity means improved nutrition. It is important to remember, however, that some meat alternatives provide similar saturated fat content and more sodium than their meat counterparts. Some products additionally contain common allergens like wheat and tree nuts. Like with any processed food, reading labels is an important part of selecting the best foods for you and your family – hopefully a meat alternative closest to its plant roots.

Replacing foods high in saturated fat, like red meat, with foods lower in saturated fat, like some meat alternatives, has been shown to reduce the risk of certain diseases. Plant-based meat alternatives are also often good sources of fiber which meats lack. Increased dietary fiber can help to reduce cholesterol and promote gut health. Lastly, plant proteins like beans and legumes are typically inexpensive and are shelf-stable. Very important for times like these where food scarcity and insecurity are occurring in certain regions.

### **Do you have some favorite meatless recipes?**

Here are some good ones!

<https://www.bonappetit.com/recipe/marinated-mixed-beans>

<https://minimalistbaker.com/1-pot-chickpea-shakshuka/>

<https://www.thekitchn.com/recipe-weeknight-vegetable-stir-fry-241996>

<https://www.bonappetit.com/recipe/healthyish-lentil-burgers>