


OVERCONSUMPTION

**PLANT-BASED
FOOD ENJOYS A
PANDEMIC BOOST**



Re  **set**

**lessons from
lockdown**

PLANT-BASED FOOD ENJOYS A PANDEMIC BOOST



When habits were broken, people thought more about what they ate, where it came from and its impacts on the world around them

We all have habits – some are good, some bad – things we don't think twice about doing. And, many of them involve food – what we eat, where we buy it and how we consume it. When the global pandemic hit, many of our habits around food changed as some people working at home had more time to grow and cook food and eat meals together, while others struggled to buy the food they needed. One of the biggest behaviour changes that could offer hope for a rapid transition was the rise of plant-based diets, which can bring a range of significant climate, nature and health benefits.

The forced suspension of habits is what psychologists and behavioural scientists call a 'habit discontinuity event'¹. Whether it's **the way we travel**², how we understand our relationships with other people, or even **the beliefs that we hold dear**³, a habit discontinuity event can cast everything in a new light. When pandemic restrictions took hold, many people were unable to shop in the way they were used to or to eat-out in cafes and restaurants. Many had much more time on their hands. And the **politics of protest**⁴ brought climate change to the fore, encouraging people to question diet as part of their impact. This combination of factors had a huge impact on our eating habits.

There were many different drivers for pandemic-induced dietary shifts. Some people used the pandemic to try and **make healthier choices and cut out junk food**⁵, while others sought to **improve their culinary skills and cook with and for their families**⁶. **Baking bread became a meditative exercise to relieve stress and**⁷ fridges filled with sourdough starters to make the popular loaf. People with any amount of space to grow their own produce started **to plant and harvest**⁸, while others sought out **more local food**⁹ producers and suppliers **to supplement or replace**¹⁰ supermarket shopping. Many people also saw the pandemic as an opportunity consciously to pursue a more climate friendly, sustainable and cruelty-free diet. One country in particular has seen a dramatic shift, but it is not alone.

In the UK, the pandemic was a tipping point for accelerating the uptake of vegan diets. According to **industry research**¹¹, one quarter of British people aged between 21 and 30 said that the pandemic had made a vegan diet far more appealing to their lifestyle. When this question was put to people of all ages, **12% agreed**¹² that a vegan diet became more attractive to them during lockdowns.

The reasons for these shifting sentiments go beyond environmental concerns. The same survey found that **over half of British adults**¹³ believed that plant-based ingredients can have medicinal and health benefits. And, further, **23% said they were eating more fresh fruit and vegetables**¹⁴ for health reasons, while 27% made changes because they wanted to save money. It's clear that the Covid-19 virus brought both physical and financial health to the forefront of public concerns, so supporting a healthy immune system with good ingredients became a **popular priority**¹⁵.



People started to plant and harvest

“Demand for our delivery service – organic fruit, veg and other staples – shot up during the lockdowns. This is from a health perspective – i.e. not buying food sprayed with poisons – but also from an environmental perspective. People are definitely more aware that animal agriculture, and in particular factory farming which produces over 95% of what is in the supermarkets, is destroying the planet. Awareness about the amount of carbon used to produce animal products is huge, as well the growing importance of food security.”

Danny Moore, Co-Founder of Farmacy Co-op



Britain has become a global hotspot for **vegan diets**¹⁶, but choosing to reduce meat and dairy consumption is on the rise everywhere. In Australia, a **2020 study found that 47% of Australians**¹⁷ were reducing their meat and dairy intake. A similar trend was found in Canada, where 43% of people were committed to reducing their meat and dairy consumption. Across China, **60% of people expect to eat fewer dairy and meat products after the pandemic**¹⁸ to limit their personal contribution to climate change.

Other countries, like India, were already more advanced with regard to meat-free diets due to cultural and religious preferences. A 2021 survey of Indian citizens found that **9% of the population now identified as fully vegan**¹⁹ and **almost one in four**²⁰ identified as vegetarian. Results like this mean India has hundreds of millions of vegetarians, **the biggest share of non-meat eaters**²¹ in the world. The growth of veganism in India has been a result of a **growing awareness around zoonotic diseases in the country**²², stimulated by the onset of the global pandemic.

Alongside the environmental and health benefits of renouncing meat and dairy, there is also a social dynamic with plant based diets increasingly being seen as more normal and attractive, especially among younger people. In many parts of the world, vegan and vegetarian diets are becoming aspirational and admirable. In India, many **Bollywood and cricket superstars have gone vegan**²³, with their adoring fans following suit. One UK survey found that **36% of adults believe eating plant-based is “an admirable thing to do”**²⁴. And, some of the world’s biggest celebrity influencers have gone meat-free, **from Beyonce and Billie Eilish to Venus Williams and Zac Efron**.²⁵



36% of adults believe eating plant-based is “an admirable thing to do”

“Celebrities and social media influencers are often seen as role models – their influence helps to bring veganism into the mainstream while their position allows them to speak out and inspire others to take action. During the last couple of years, and especially during the Covid-19 pandemic, many of us have spent more time on our phones, following the lives of our favourite actors, singers and athletes. Interestingly, a 2021 survey by The Vegan Society found that 1 in 5 Brits have cut down on meat consumption during the pandemic while 15% have reduced their dairy/egg intake over the lockdown period. While health, environmental or animal rights are usually the top reasons given for cutting back, there’s no doubting the power influencers can have on people’s decision to go vegan.”

Francine Jordan, The Vegan Society UK

The shift away from meat and dairy-heavy diets could have large implications for the planet. Currently, the food system is responsible for around **one quarter of global greenhouse gas emissions**²⁶, 47% of which are from livestock and fisheries, as well as the land use for their management. Unlike energy, where new technologies are making rapid transition more feasible, decarbonising agriculture is a daunting challenge. As such, the idea that dietary change is a must for creating a low carbon food system is commonplace.



It is also fostering an emergent, innovative and highly lucrative food sector. In the USA, the sale of plant-based products **grew by 27% in 2021**²⁷. It’s estimated that the American market for vegan products is **now worth \$7 billion**²⁸, up from \$5.5 billion in 2019, and growing 2.5 times faster than total food sales. In the UK, the supermarket Aldi saw its **vegan food sales grow by 250% in 2021**²⁹ and are forecasting even higher sales this year.

There is even scope for plant-based diets to stimulate dynamic, thriving local economies. The National Food Strategy for England, published last year, emphasised the benefits that could accumulate from developing the domestic manufacturing of alternative, plant based proteins, rather than importing them. The report concludes that this could create **upwards of 10,000 new factory jobs and 6,500 additional jobs in the farming industry**³⁰. There are known health dangers to shifting to highly processed food products – even if they are vegan – so it will be important to balance manufacturing exciting new proteins with simply growing more seasonal vegetables close to where they will be eaten.

The pandemic has undoubtedly changed the way people think about their food and what they eat. Many of these changes will stand the test of time as new habits are developed and the increased visibility of plant-based diets sees a different, positive kind of social contagion as people follow friends and family members to eat differently – and with less climate impact. The shift has a momentum likely to continue as the pandemic subsides, as the new diets have made people feel better, healthier and more aligned with the natural world.

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