

WHOLEHEARTEDLY VEGAN

For a healthy ticker and proper weight, cardiologist Joel Kahn is pumped up on the benefits of a plant-based diet— and the doctor religiously follows his own advice



BY REBECCA POWERS
PHOTOGRAPH BY DAVID LEWINSKI

♥ **Joel Kahn hasn't had a hamburger since the 1980s.** Fish? Not in a dozen years.

A cardiologist (it's Joel Kahn, M.D.), he follows a vegan diet, and is always happy to explain the benefits of eschewing animal fat. Those benefits include weight control, the 52-year-old husband and father of three says. He has been tipping the scales at the same number for two decades.

"I work typically 18-hour days, day after day after day, and I have the energy to get it done, and I feel in part that's due to a lack of chemicals and processed foods," he says, while drinking a glass of coconut water ("right out of the belly of a young Thai coconut") at The Raw Café in Midtown.

Kahn, director of Corporate Wellness and Preventive Cardiology at the Detroit Medical Center, is an advocate of lifestyle choices that prevent heart disease. He's also active in VegMichigan, a 6,000-member vegetarian group.

Here are a few healthy bites from the doctor.

SMALL STEPS:

If you had to make just two changes in your diet: Don't eat processed/cured meats: hotdogs, ham, bacon. Replace them with vegetables.

Give up sweetened beverages — both diet and non-diet pop, athletic drinks, fruit juices — and make water the staple of what you drink.

POPULAR CULTURE:

Frankly, the whole celebrity vegetarian/vegan trend has been very helpful: Joaquin Phoenix, Carrie Underwood, Bill Clinton. You've got Mario Batali, who's doing meatless Mondays across all his restaurants. Wonderful example.

VEGAN PHILOSOPHY:

There are really three reasons people do this: health, animal rights, and environmental (to reduce your carbon footprint). The data on energy used in our country on raising cattle and chickens, raising grain to feed the cattle, is unbelievable.

ROLE MODEL:

I saw a patient this morning who said: 'I was referred to an extremely overweight, non-exercising cardiologist. I couldn't possibly ever feel comfortable taking lifestyle advice from him.'

PHYSICAL ACTIVITY:

I'll never be in the Olympics and I'll never win the 50-yard dash, but I do yoga, swimming, spinning, weights, and other training five, six, or seven days a week, usually very early in the morning.

ADVANCED CHOLESTEROL TESTING:

I happen to be a proponent. We've done the same cholesterol test on people for 40 years. We've seen a reduction in heart disease, but it isn't dramatic. [With advanced], you can count the number of cholesterol particles in the blood. The LDL particle number, and there's a relatively inexpensive test that offers that.

STATINS:

What I try and do is really dig in If I can confirm they're as clean and healthy as they were as a young person, I will often really push lifestyle and diet and not move to drugs too quickly.

PIONEERS:

Credit goes to Dr. Dean Ornish in California who, in the '80s, started a small study of very severe heart patients. He did vegan [but] he did allow egg whites and low-fat yogurt. It was vegetarian, almost vegan,

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biofeedback, group discussion, and yoga, and he actually saw they had less blockage, less blood-flow problems.

A second doctor, Caldwell Esselstyn, who's actually a thyroid surgeon at the Cleveland Clinic, was watching his colleagues do bypass surgery 25 years ago and asked them if they would give patients who were too sick for surgery to him for dietary therapy. He instituted the ultimate vegan low-fat, 100-percent plant-based, no oil, no nuts, no seeds, no fish. He followed these people and published his data [now a book], *Prevent and Reverse Heart Disease*.

He's got follow-up of over 20 years with these people. Many have done unbelievably well. You have to be careful and it has to be a comprehensive program of diet and exercise. But physically, a vegan diet is an option along with other proven measures, and it can be recommended to a large group of patients.

DIETS:

Flexitarian (occasional fish and dairy). It's certainly the easiest step for some people. I see it as a transition. It's the brass standard (as opposed to the gold standard). It's one people can grab onto and still be comfortable at Thanksgiving with their relatives

or comfortable at an evening out at a restaurant.

Caveman/paleo. It's very hot right now. No processed foods, a lot of raw, but not completely raw. Some people eat raw meat. They eat buffalo, ostrich. It's untested, a theory. It's attractive. It's sexy. It emphasizes eliminating processed food, so it's already way ahead of the Western diet.

Anti-inflammation. Dr. Andrew Weil and Dr. Stephen Sinatra have been big proponents, as well as many others. It's really a variation of the Mediterranean diet. Lots of fruit and vegetables, deep-water fish, reduced wheat and gluten. It's far better than the standard Western diet. I would heartily endorse anybody grabbing on to it.

Everything has to be based against the fact that most Americans aren't eating any of the diets we're

talking about. These are all wonderful transitions on the spectrum. They're good places for people to move to.

AMERICAN WAY:

The standard American (Western) diet is where 70 percent of calories come from oil, sugar, fat.

There are islands of hope in the sea of despair. Clearly, retail restaurants like the one we're sitting in, the farm-to-table trend, the Eastern Market, Michelle Obama (fitness), and the enormous rise of farmers markets around the country. Some schools have eliminated pop and sugar-sweetened beverages.

HEALTH IMPEDIMENTS:

You have big industry that's feeding the vast majority of America in the army, prisons, schools, colleges, and it's a very uphill battle to combat multi-billion dollar companies with deep pockets that do research to make food look and smell good and be modestly priced and yet be so devoid of health benefits — until it's occupy McDonald's or occupy Starbucks.

The 99 percent is being fed low-nutrition food labeled as natural or as healthy; these are meaningless terms. The only term out there that means anything is USDA organic. Until people speak up, I don't think we're turning the corner on obesity and turning the



corner on diabetes and heart disease anytime soon. It's time for a national chain of truly healthy fresh food.

PROGRESS:

The Detroit Public Schools, no matter what else is going on, have got some good things happening. The kids are getting good food, two meals a day, sometimes three. They're actually seeing fresh produce. The head of that program is a very honorable woman who has done a great job. Detroit City Councilman André Spivey just put together a task force to deal with childhood obesity and nutrition, bringing together a lot of good people. Also, the success of Eastern Market, Whole Foods coming, and young businesses rising up to bring whole-grain, plant-based foods to the people. It depends on people educating themselves and walking into their corner store and saying, 'My doctors told me for my diabetes I need

fresh produce. I'll keep shopping here if you bring in fresh produce and fresh products.'

BARBECUE:

If you burn meat, you create some of the most dangerous chemicals to the human body. It's not my vision that we're going to shut down every tailgate and barbecue, but people do need to be aware so they can make an educated choice. Maybe it's something they want to save for a couple of major national holidays.

DR. KAHN AT HOME:

We have a very good blender to make smoothies and soups, a Crock-Pot, rice steamer, vegetable steamer.

DR. KAHN AT WORK:

Wellness is what [DMC President and CEO] Mike Duggan hired me to vitalize. We have 12,000 employees, we're self-insured. Our employees' health and wellness affects corporate costs. We had the first two

vending machines in Michigan that are vegan, gluten-free, healthy.

INSPIRATION:

I would encourage anyone to watch *Forks Over Knives*, a 90-minute documentary.

Concerned with what he calls a "horrendous family history" of coronary artery disease,

Jeffrey Shillman began seeing Dr. Joel Kahn nearly a decade ago.

"On my first visit, he told me to read a book called *The China Study*," says the Bloomfield Township attorney, who has seen a 100-point decline in his overall cholesterol in the years since that first visit. His high blood pressure is also gone.

"I'm a vegan, except that I eat fish; I'm a pescatarian," says Shillman, 66. "I could give up fish, but I wouldn't be able to keep weight on."

Shillman also takes the lowest possible Benicar dose, a 20-mg tablet cut in half.

"Everybody looks at me and says, 'Why are you doing that? So what, you may live two weeks longer,'" he says. The answer: So that he can live better.

"You're not at all sluggish," he says. "You're not as tired."

In response to friends who urge: "Enjoy life; you only live once," Shillman replies: "You get used to what you eat."

"I bought my wife a dehydrator," he says. "She makes kale chips."

Other household treats include grape smoothies in a blender and frozen, organic berries with almond milk.

In combination with his advice from Kahn, Shillman goes to Inspired Wellness in Birmingham. His routine includes the elliptical machine, swimming, and Pilates.

All in all, he says, "I feel like it's doing me good."

— Rebecca Powers

RESOURCE LIST

Websites:

- drjkahn.com
- ornishspectrum.com
- prmi.org
- thewalkingsite.com/10000steps.html
- americaonthemove.org
- letsmove.gov
- mindlesseating.org
- smallplatemovement.org

Event:

Annual VegFest, April 29, Suburban Collection Showplace, Novi; vegmichigan.org

Reading/watching:

- The China Study*, by T. Colin Campbell, Ph.D., with Thomas M. Campbell II
- Forks Over Knives: The Plant-Based Way to Health*, by T. Colin Campbell, Ph.D., and Caldwell Esselstyn Jr., M.D.; forksoverknives.com (book or DVD documentary)
- The Vegan Souffood Guide to the Galaxy*, by Afya Ibomu