



After 40 Years in the Pizza Business, I Went Plant-Based and Transformed My Health

By Mike Leeka
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Feb. 28, 2018, started out like an ordinary day. In the morning, I went to my doctor's office for my quarterly blood work and checkup. My doctor told me, once again, to lose weight: 12 pounds over the next 12 weeks, before my next checkup. But I'd gotten used to hearing this same thing over and over at these appointments.

I was on one medication for [high cholesterol](#), two medications for [diabetes](#), and three for [high blood pressure](#)—six medications, and I was only 51 years old.

A Pivotal Night

My wife, Denise, and I have always had a wonderful life together, but we've also both always struggled with excess weight. Going out to eat, especially at diners, was a favorite hobby of ours, and I'd spent almost 40 years in the pizza business.



That evening, after my checkup and another dinner out, we returned home and decided to watch a movie. Denise had downloaded a documentary to her Kindle several weeks earlier after seeing it recommended on Facebook, and we'd been meaning to watch it. That documentary was *Forks Over Knives*. It changed our lives. We sat for an hour and a half focused on her little Kindle screen, as we learned how a whole-food, plant-based diet could help with many of the health issues I'd been battling. As soon as it ended, I looked at my wife and said, "We're doing this, starting tomorrow!"

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Losing Weight on a Plant-Based Diet

Unprepared as we were, my wife and I went all in on plant-based eating the next day: No meat, no dairy, no eggs. Anyone who knew us could tell you this was going to be a huge challenge, since all of those things were a big part of our diets. Even our son, who has been vegan for years, was a little concerned that we were going all-in so quickly.

Our plan was just to try plant-based for three months, in the hope of losing some weight before my next doctor's appointment. To get started, we cleaned out our pantry and fridge, getting rid of anything that had animal products, and we just ate what was left until we made it to the store [to restock](#). Our son was able to give us plenty of simple meal ideas to get started.

The biggest challenge was not eating out as much as we had in the past. But we stuck to it, and three months later I went in for my checkup. My cholesterol levels and blood pressure had both decreased. Plus, my [A1C](#) (a measure of average blood glucose) was down for the first time in years—and I had lost 20 pounds! That was all the motivation we needed. We decided to stick to the new lifestyle.

Passion for Wellness

In the two years since we adopted a plant-based diet, the weight has continued to come off. Collectively, we've lost 100 pounds. (I've lost 70, and Denise has lost 30.) Instead of the six medications I used to take, I now only take two, and I hope to be off those last two very soon.

The amazing part is that we still eat—a lot. We keep discovering more and more delicious [whole-food, plant-based recipes](#) that we love. My favorite foods are pretty simple: potatoes, rice, beans, and fruit, so we try to find recipes that incorporate those. We continue to explore new recipes.

We are leading a more active lifestyle now, too. We love walking together and try to find ways to squeeze in as much exercise as possible, whether it be on the elliptical in our basement or at the gym. Each of us would still like to lose another 15 pounds or so.

We've watched every documentary about plant-based eating that we can find, and read lots of books on the

subject. I've just completed a course at Cornell University to become certified in plant-based nutrition, and I plan to continue my education in this field. This has become my passion. Looking back on my years in the pizza business, I realize that I was only adding to people's sickness. Going forward, I'd like to help others reverse chronic disease and restore their health. When we know better, we do better. I hope to encourage others to experience the healing power of food.

Ready to get started? Check out [Forks Meal Planner](#), FOK's easy weekly meal-planning tool to keep you on a healthy plant-based path. To learn more about a whole-food, plant-based diet, visit our [Plant-Based Primer](#).