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Detox, high-protein, juice diets... January comes with an onslaught of health advice. We spoke to some of the UK's leading nutritionists to sort fact from fiction

Myth #1 Fresh fruit and veg are better than frozen

Next time you need to buy fresh produce, consider heading to the frozen aisle instead. Research published in the *Journal of Agricultural and Food Chemistry* found that frozen foods can have just as many vitamins – and sometimes more, as they are flash-frozen soon after harvesting. “Fresh fruit and veg start to lose some nutrients as soon as they’re picked,” explains Dr Laura Wyness, registered nutritionist and co-author of *Eating Well for Menopause*. “Vitamin C is particularly susceptible to being lost after harvesting. Peas can lose around half of their vitamin C during the first 48 hours. Freezing fruit and veg can help retain nutrients.”

The verdict Frozen fruit and veg are just as nutritious as their fresh counterparts – and they are convenient, longer lasting and often cheaper. »



Food myths

– busted!

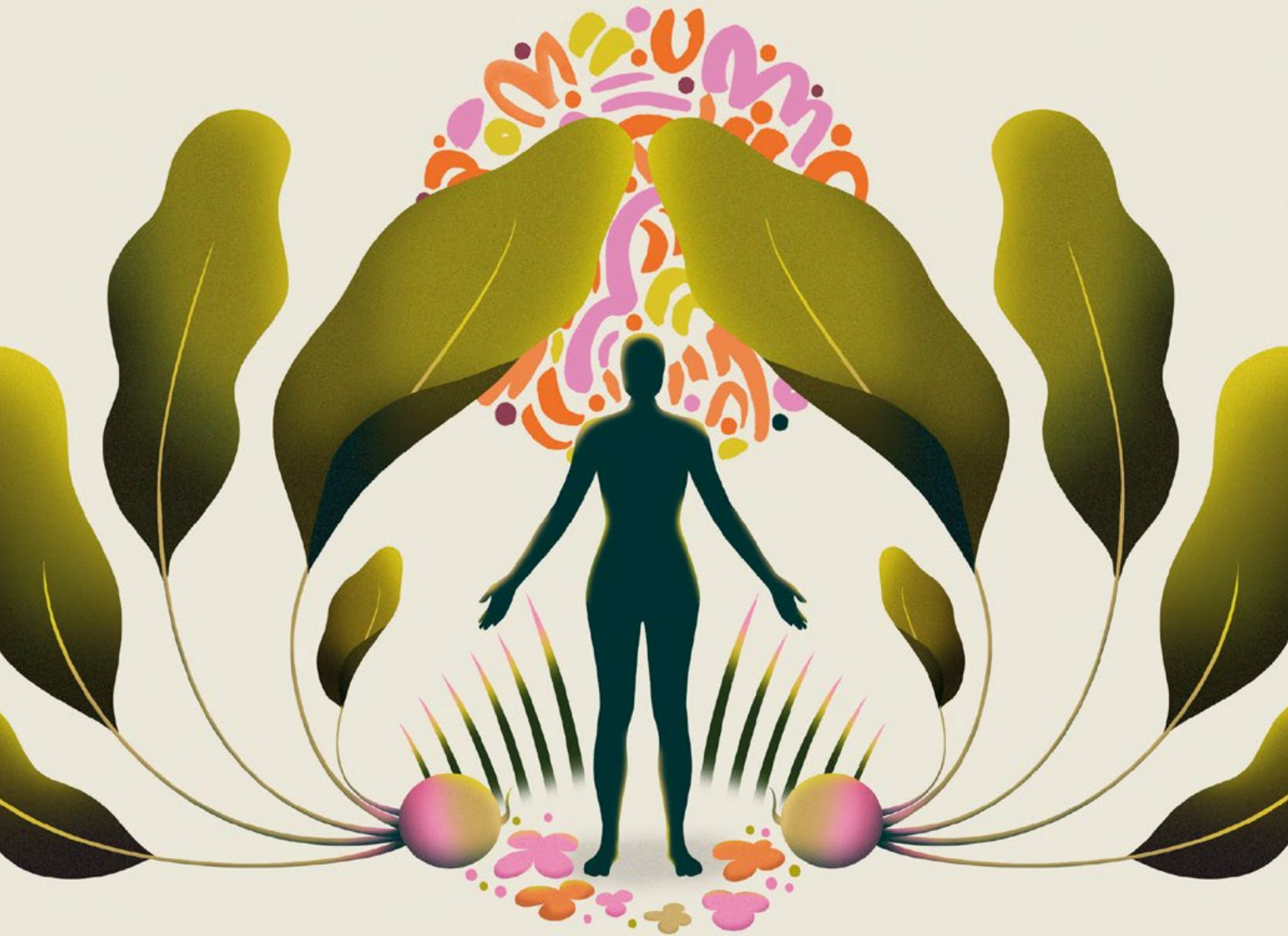
Myth #2

You can't get enough protein on a plant-based diet

"Most of us [in the UK] already get more protein than we need," says Dr Shireen Kassam, co-author of *Eating Plant-Based: Scientific Answers to Your Nutrition Questions*. "A plant based diet can easily meet protein requirements for all ages and stages of life. Eating a variety of whole plant foods, when meeting calorie requirements, will mean that protein requirements are easily met." Plant proteins include legumes (beans, lentils, chickpeas, peas and peanuts), soya products (tofu, tempeh, soya milk alternative), grains (pasta, rice, oats, bulgur wheat), quinoa, nuts and seeds.

The verdict

The idea that excluding meat from your diet will leave you short on protein is unfounded.



Myth #3 Going gluten free is 'healthier'

Approximately one in 10 people in the UK now follows a gluten-free diet – but there is no evidence that eliminating gluten is beneficial. The exception, of course, is for people diagnosed with coeliac disease (1% of the UK population), in which the body mistakes gluten – a protein in wheat, barley and rye – as a threat and produces antibodies to fight it. An important study published in the journal *Gastroenterology* found that going gluten free offers no health benefits to healthy people who avoid gluten as a choice. Gut-health dietitian Kaitlin Colucci confirms, “Unless you’ve been diagnosed with coeliac disease, there’s no need to bypass foods containing gluten.” And, she adds, “Many gluten-containing grains are packed with essential nutrients and fibre that you might miss out on,” while “some gluten-free products contain unhealthy fats and preservatives that are less beneficial to health.”

The verdict If you think you have a sensitivity to gluten, see your GP to rule out coeliac disease. Testing is also available for other conditions, such as irritable bowel syndrome, and treatment of symptoms might include avoiding foods containing gluten.



Myth #4 Fat is bad for you

It's been ingrained in us to steer clear of fat – partly because of its high calorie content, but mainly because of concerns about heart disease. Yet research has shown that fat is *not* the enemy. An eight-year study of almost 49,000 women published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* found no noticeable health benefits associated with low-fat diets. “The Mediterranean diet, which includes 35-40% of calories from fat, is touted to be one of the best for general health and longevity,” says registered dietitian Dr Linia Patel. “This comes mainly from healthy unsaturated fats, including those in olive oil, nuts, seeds and oily fish. Unsaturated fats are vital for health. They help reduce LDL (bad) cholesterol and the overall risk of heart disease and stroke.”

The verdict Don't cut out fat, but it's worth eating fewer saturated fats.

Myth #6 You can 'detox' your body with food and supplements

Detoxification is a normal process carried out in the body to remove waste and toxins. Dr Hazel Wallace, author of *The Female Factor*, believes the idea of 'detoxing' is nonsense. “Your body is 'detoxifying' all the time,” she says. “A good diet can help your body do its job, but assuming you have a healthy, functioning liver and kidneys, it should not require any assistance.” Can detox teas, juices, and supplements

help? “They may help you lose weight in the short term as they often contain laxatives, diuretics or are very low in calories. They don't have magically detoxing properties and can be expensive.”

The verdict Save your money and use it to add extra fruit and vegetables to your weekly shop. »

Myth #5 'Natural' sugars are better for you

So-called 'natural' sugars, such as honey, brown rice syrup, maple syrup, agave syrup and coconut sugar, are often believed to be 'healthier' than white sugar because they contain more micronutrients – but they're not necessarily better for you. "There is very little nutritional difference between natural and processed sources of sugars, and they have a similar effect on our blood sugar," explains Rhiannon Lambert, registered nutritionist and author of *The Science of Nutrition*. The amount of micronutrients these natural sugars contain is so low that you would need to eat huge amounts to get any benefit from them – and that would increase the risk of heart disease, type 2 diabetes and obesity. "All sources of so-called free sugars [any sugar added to food or drinks or found in honey, syrups and juices] should be limited to 5% of overall energy intake," says Rhiannon.

The verdict

Aim to keep all sugars in your diet to a minimum.



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DECODED NUTRITION JARGON

Some of the most discussed (and misunderstood) terms explained.

ANTIOXIDANTS are molecules that protect cells from damage caused by 'free radicals' – unstable molecules that form naturally in the body but also come about as a result of stress, cigarette smoke, UV light and pollutants. Our bodies make some of the antioxidants we need; others come from fruits, vegetables and grains. Examples of dietary antioxidants include betacarotene, vitamins C and E, and polyphenols (a range of compounds found in many plant foods).

BLOOD GLUCOSE refers to the amount of glucose (a type of sugar) circulating in your blood. It's normal for blood glucose to rise after you eat, but large, frequent rises ('spikes') or consistently high levels may increase your risk of developing heart disease and type 2 diabetes.

'MACROS', short for macronutrients, are substances your body needs in large amounts to function (relative to micronutrients: vitamins and minerals) and that give us energy. The three macronutrients are carbohydrates, protein and fat.

PLANT-BASED DIET One centred on fruit, vegetables, nuts, seeds, oils, wholegrains and legumes, with few or no animal products. The term encompasses vegan, vegetarian and flexitarian, including Mediterranean-style, diets.

PREBIOTICS are non-digestible fibres that provide food for the bacteria in your gut, encouraging their growth. Foods rich in prebiotics include most 'fibre-rich' foods, such as onions, garlic, asparagus, oats, legumes and bananas.

PROBIOTICS are live bacteria that colonise your gut and provide health benefits. They are found in fermented foods such as yogurt (check the label for live and active cultures), kefir, many cheeses, kimchi, kombucha, sauerkraut, miso and tempeh.

Anita Bean is a registered nutritionist. She has worked with the London Marathon and is the author of The Vegan Athlete's Cookbook and The Runner's Cookbook.