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Can Sustainable Eating and Flexible Eating Go Hand in Hand?

This article will explore the two topical areas of sustainability and flexible eating, and whether these two approaches can work together

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WHAT IS SUSTAINABLE EATING?

The Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) define a sustainable diet as “those diets with low environmental impacts which contribute to food and nutrition security and to a healthy life for present and future generations. Sustainable diets are protective and respectful of biodiversity and ecosystems, culturally acceptable, accessible, economically fair and affordable; nutritionally adequate, safe and healthy; while optimising natural and human resources” ⁽¹⁾. This is an important definition, as it highlights that for a diet to be sustainable it not only needs to be protective of the environment; the diet also needs to be nutritious, culturally-acceptable, affordable and accessible.

It is important to highlight that these sustainable eating guidelines are similar to the public health eating guidelines in many countries, including the Irish Food Pyramid and the UK Eatwell Guide ^(4, 5). In fact, a report from 2016 found that when energy intake was matched, following the

Sustainable eating is a complex topic and there is no one ‘sustainable diet’ that applies globally. However, some sustainable eating reports have emerged in recent years which provide some guidance. Most notably the “Planetary Health Diet” by the EAT-Lancet Commission and “One Blue Dot Eating Patterns for Health and Environmental Sustainability: A Reference Guide for Dietitians” by the British Dietetic Association (BDA) ⁽²⁻³⁾.

Key points from these guidelines include:

- Reducing red meat intake from current levels — for example, the One Blue Dot guide advises a limit of 350g-500g (cooked weight) of red meat per person per week and limiting processed red meat as much as possible.
- Prioritising plant-based proteins like beans, pulses, soy products, nuts and seeds.
- Consuming sustainably-sourced fish at least twice per week, including oily fish at least once per week.
- Moderate consumption of dairy.
- Prioritising wholegrains and tubers such as potatoes.
- Increasing tinned, frozen, local and seasonal fruit and vegetables
- Limiting foods high in fat, sugar and salt.
- Choosing tap water and tea or coffee over soft drinks.
- Reducing food waste.

recommendations of the Eatwell Guide, it would lead to a 32% lower environmental footprint in comparison with the average UK dietary intake ⁽⁶⁾. This highlights that following a balanced diet appears to be a win-win in terms of health and the environment.



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WHAT IS FLEXIBLE EATING?

Flexibility is “the ability to change or be changed easily according to the situation” ⁽⁷⁾; this is the opposite of rigidity. Therefore, flexible eating is the avoidance of strict food rules or restrictions. Being able to eat a wide variety of foods. Also being able to adapt our eating for different situations, including social events and celebrations.

Numerous studies have found that a flexible approach to eating is associated with a lower risk of disordered eating, and improvements in mental health and body composition as compared with rigid eating behaviours. ⁽⁸⁻¹²⁾

Flexible eating should not be confused with ‘flexible dieting’ which involves tracking calories and macronutrients for the pursuit of weight loss. Such dieting is arguably often not a very flexible

approach.

There is a significant overlap between flexible eating and intuitive eating. As the intuitive eating process promotes a flexible relationship with food. Intuitive eating is a specific approach described by its founders, Evelyn Tribole and Elyse Resch, as “a personal process of honouring health by listening and responding to the direct messages of the body in order to meet your physical and psychological needs” ⁽¹³⁾. However, flexible eating is not synonymous with intuitive eating, as somebody could eat in a flexible way without incorporating other key principles of intuitive eating such as honouring hunger and fullness cues, coping with emotions without always using food, or developing an understanding of body respect, intuitive movement or gentle nutrition. ⁽¹⁴⁾

Is It Possible to Eat Sustainably in a Flexible Way?

As with most questions related to nutrition, the answer to this question depends on the circumstances.

On the one hand, there is already some flexibility within sustainable eating guidelines such as One Blue Dot and the Planetary Health Diet as no food groups are excluded. This is an important point to highlight, as veganism is sometimes

portrayed as the only sustainable way of eating, whereas the current evidence-based sustainable guidelines promote plant-based diets rather than plant-only diets (as outlined above) ^(2,3). Sustainable eating advice should be flexible and adaptable by design as it would be far too simplistic to imply that one specific diet suits all people and all geographic environments globally.

Even so, sustainable eating guides may not be suitable for all people. For example, the BDA highlights that “[dietitians] should be aware of the challenges that may result for vulnerable groups and individuals (e.g. those suffering ill health, pregnant women, people on low incomes, and older adults) and be able to modify advice as appropriate” ⁽¹⁵⁾.

Sustainable eating and plant-based diets can also be used as a socially-acceptable mask for rigid and restrictive eating in some cases ⁽¹⁶⁻¹⁷⁾. Therefore, it is important to establish the true motivation behind sustainable eating, in the context of an overall nutritional assessment and to rule out red flags for disordered eating. For those who are struggling with disordered eating, it may be in their best interest to remove or reduce the focus on sustainable eating, at least for the short-term until their recovery progresses.

It can also be helpful to highlight that

sustainable eating habits can occur as a side effect of developing a more flexible relationship with food, and that a balanced nourishing diet is in-line with sustainable guidelines. For example, for a client with binge eating disorder, eating in a flexible



way is likely to lead to a more balanced and sustainable nutritional intake over-time and less binges; in comparison to those who are in a more rigid restrict-binge cycle.

For those who are in a position to incorporate elements of sustainable eating, this can be approached in a more flexible way. Focusing on sustainable additions rather than the more restrictive elements of sustainable eating guides, like portion control and reducing animal products and foods high in fat, sugar and salt. It may be possible to revisit some of this as a longer-term goal. Of course, this depends on the client and their relationship with food.



Examples of sustainable dietary additions include

Adding in more plant-based foods, such as fruit, vegetables, legumes, wholegrains, soya-based products, plant-based oil, nuts and seeds

Buying sustainably sourced fish

Adding in tap water as a more sustainable drink option

It may also be helpful to focus on the elements of sustainable eating that aren't directly related to nutritional intake. Like reducing food waste, reduced reliance on packaging (particularly plastic) and buying sustainable and ethically-produced products. Another approach is to focus on other aspects of sustainability like sustainable transport options and not contributing to the fast-fashion industry.

Even when focusing on things like reducing food waste or sustainable additions rather than restrictions, it is still important to encourage a degree of

flexibility as approaching anything with an all-or-nothing mindset is unhelpful. For example, if a client is working on reducing food waste in a rigid way this may lead to feeling that they must always finish all the food on their plate (if leftovers can't be saved for another meal), hence overriding their fullness signals. So it may be helpful to discuss putting this in context and always allowing for shades of grey in terms of eating behaviour. Furthermore, promoting sustainable eating in this flexible way is likely to make sustainable eating less daunting and more accessible to more people.



TAKE - HOME MESSAGES

Sustainable eating involves eating in a way that is environmentally-friendly, while also being nutritious, culturally-acceptable, affordable and accessible. Flexible eating is enjoying a wide variety of foods, avoiding strict food rules or restrictions and being able to adapt your eating to different situations.

It is possible to eat sustainably in a flexible way, but this very much depends on the individual and their current relationship with food. For those who

are in a position to bring in elements of sustainable eating, this can be made more flexible. Focusing on sustainable additions rather than restrictions and focus on non-food parts of sustainable eating like reducing food waste and packaging.

As always with nutrition, there is no 'one fits all' answer to this question. It is always best to assess this on an individual basis and to support our clients with putting this into the context of their personal circumstances.

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