

# In Conversation with Dr. David Jenkins

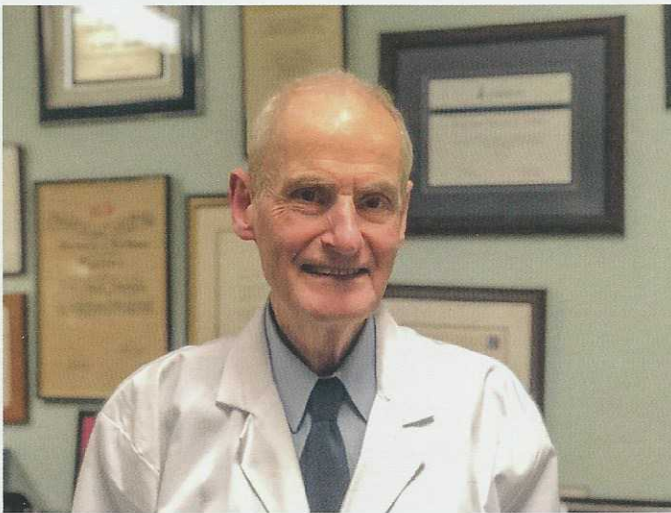
Written by Carole Audet

Dr. David Jenkins is a professor in both the Departments of Medicine and Nutritional Sciences, Faculty of Medicine at the University of Toronto, a staff physician in the Division of Endocrinology and Metabolism, and the Director of the Clinical Nutrition and Risk Factor Modification Centre at St. Michael's Hospital.

He's published over 200 original papers in his area of research and related topics and received multiple awards for his work.

In recognition of his studies to promote human health while reducing the negative impact on the environment, in 2007 Dr. Jenkins won the Benjamin Spock Award for Compassion in Medicine by the Physician's Committee for Responsible Medicine

He embraced a vegan lifestyle 15 years ago, after decades of vegetarianism.



As a researcher in the use of diet for the prevention and treatment of hyperlipidemia and diabetes, surprisingly Dr. Jenkins's primary reason for recommending a Plant-Based diet is a humanitarian one.

"I think that our children, our grandchildren, will probably think that should have been the reason all along. And they'll wonder why their species did the sort of things it did to other creatures on this planet," he explains.

While that's his personal why, he's quick to point out that most people today don't necessarily agree. "It's not the reason now because we're more self-serving, more

concerned about our own health. We wonder, well, would I live a happier life? That's what people want to know today, but I don't think it's going to be so in the future."

But for him, animal welfare is the number one reason one should adopt a vegan diet, followed by lessening the impact on the environment and one's own health third.

"You need to consider the ethical, moral and environmental costs of what you're eating. That's also important and not just your personal health. You could argue that if you haven't got a healthy environment, it doesn't matter whether you're eating healthily because you're still going to succumb quickly. You could say that they're linked, but even if you want to disengage them, then I think there's more to what we eat, more to what we do in general than just whether we are comfortable with it or whether it's good for us at the time.

"I think that's not the only reason why we should do things in life, whether it's eating, whether it's the sort of plastics that one uses, whether it's the car that one drives or airline visits that one pays to exotic places to have a holiday—all these things really. It's not just whether we enjoy it. I think we have to think of what we're doing generally on this very small and fragile planet," he reflects.

Dr. Jenkins led a team that went on to publish the

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glycemic index in 1981—an index that rates carbohydrates by their effect on blood sugar levels. But meat, poultry, fish and eggs don't contain carbohydrates, and many who champion low-carb diets today misleadingly use this as an argument to consume more animal products. However, these low-carb diets that recommend high animal protein intake, and in many cases high-fat foods, was one of the reasons behind the research that led to the glycemic index in the first place. It wasn't designed as proof that we should avoid carbs and increase our consumption of animal protein.

“What we did is we said, well, can you say this about all carbohydrates? Perhaps you can make some adverse comments about sugar-sweetened soft drinks. And very high refined wheat flour products, for example, are not the best to eat, but it doesn't mean that you have to drive your dietary habits into eating more meat.

“We brought out the glycemic index to show that carbohydrate was not simply carbohydrate. It was a vast cornucopia of products, some good, some not so good and some very good. You put things like fruits, vegetables, whole grains, legumes at the top of the list and take from those, if you want the lower glycemic index versions,” he explains.

Jenkins thinks Health Canada's most recent food guide is an indication that we are on the right track because it highlights the importance of choosing more Plant-Based foods. There's been pushback, but we need to look at the bigger picture. Jenkins reasons that some of the negative economic impact of reducing our consumption of animal products could be alleviated with a shift in government subsidies so that those farmers who are impacted can move into Plant-Based food production.

He explains, “I think these things are big issues that we have to deal with, but I do think that the Canadian guidelines and therefore the food guide have gone in the right direction; whether we can hold the line is another thing when the next food guide comes out. I'm glad we do see countries and guideline committees stepping out

well ahead of where everyone is.”

In February of 2020, a Toronto newspaper published a piece that outlined why Dr. Jenkins is against the keto diet, a low-carb, high-fat diet.

“We did a number of studies where we showed that you could actually have low- carbohydrate diets with increased plant food. I'm certainly not against those. Those are fine, but the more extreme versions have usually been very high meat consumption, animal product consumption diets. For a number of health reasons, I don't think they are the best.”

He continues, “We were invited in to collaborate on a study by Dr. Neal Barnard from Washington. His study showed very nicely that if he took people who were on a regular diet and randomized them to either continue their own diet eaten in a sensible way or a vegan diet, he shared really very good benefits, in terms of hemoglobin A1c, for those who followed the vegan diet, and lower levels of LDL cholesterol and blood pressure.”

In addition to those health benefits, Dr. Jenkins believes whole plant foods are the best options to reduce cardiovascular risks for diabetics—the major cause of death in that population. “Even if their diabetes is only improved, which is a good thing, especially for those who are already on medications, the heart disease risk is greatly reduced. I think that may be the important feature of the Plant-Based diet in this area.”

While a five-year study looking at his Portfolio diet and what it does to arterial damage was sidetracked, partly due to the pandemic, this septuagenarian isn't giving up or thinking about retirement.

“What keeps me going is the fact that we have a number of relatively simple questions, which we haven't finished. So, there's a job undone. In the Toronto area, we've got a strong group of vegetarians and vegans, and they are very interested in the work we're doing; they need the answers because they have to answer to the public as to what we should be doing. We feel that if we can make an effort in that area, it's important to give people this ammunition.” ●