



## The secret to disease-free living: a wholefood plant-based diet. An interview with Dr Irene Lo

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Dr Irene Lai-oi Lo has been a vegan for 20 years. Her life as a hepatobiliary surgeon at Queen Elizabeth Hospital is fuelled by uncooked greens and cruelty-free wholefood. She embodies the discipline and compassion of a plant-based philosophy, and a year ago she published her first book 《我醫我素，健康素食小百科》. She strives to share her choice of lifestyle with her patients, and she is encouraging the wider audience in Hong Kong to do the same.

### Search for a healthy, cruelty-free diet

When Dr Lo graduated from medical school 20 years ago, she had the opportunity to visit a farm where she witnessed the butchering of animals. Appalled by the cruelty and suffering of the animals, she determined to stop eating meat. Like many others, she says she had numerous questions: “Will I have enough nutrients? Will a plant-based diet make me fall sick more easily? Will I die?” These doubts and uncertainties, together with a lack of awareness of plant-based eating in Hong Kong became her motivation to search for a healthy diet.

After thorough research, she realised that meat is not as healthy as society believes. An “undesirable package” of antibiotics, tranquilisers, hormones, and other chemicals, all of which can be harmful to humans, is released or added artificially in the

rearing and processing of animals. In addition, the processing of refined carbohydrates such as white sugar, bread, pasta, and noodles and the high-temperature cooking of other foods destroy certain vitamins and nutrients necessary for healthy living. Insufficient dietary intake of these nutrients can lead to a weaker immune system and increase the risk of cancers and other metabolic diseases. Research has shown that a plant-based diet that emphasises specifically healthy plant foods is associated with a substantially lower risk of type 2 diabetes than a diet rich in less healthy plants and animal foods.<sup>1,2</sup> Adequate sunlight exposure, sufficient water intake, regular exercise, and a cigarette-free lifestyle are also key to healthy living. Dr Lo thus opted for a wholefood plant-based diet.

### Wholefood plant-based diet and its benefits

A wholefood plant-based diet comprises three key components: plant-based food, wholefood, and raw food. It is based on raw unrefined plants, whole grains (such as brown rice, red rice, quinoa, and millet) and fruits, and excludes meat, dairy products, eggs, and highly-refined or processed food.

After switching to a wholefood plant-based diet, Dr Lo noticed incremental changes in her life: “I haven’t been sick for the past 10 years. Not even

a sore throat!” explained Dr Lo. “My skin became better and wounds healed faster. There were no more menstrual cramps or menorrhagia, and the pimples on my face and back were gone. My breast fibroadenosis even resolved without treatment.”

## Community engagement

After her positive experience with the wholefood plant-based diet, Dr Lo decided she needed to share this information with others. She began by writing information leaflets for her patients. She would note down advice about changes they could make in their diet to hasten recovery, reduce recurrence of their disease, and to generally lead a healthier life. For example, as a hepatobiliary surgeon, she saw numerous patients undergoing Whipple operation, hepatectomy, and many other types of gastrointestinal tract surgery. Postoperatively she would recommend patients to consider a change to a wholefood plant-based diet, with a focus on achieving “digestive efficiency”. These leaflets were very well received by her patients, who often returned to her clinic excited to see her and share their positive experiences with the dietary changes. Gradually she broadened her advice to cover other health issues such as dyslipidaemia, hypertension, diabetes, gastrointestinal disease, and many others.

With all this positive feedback, she realised she was onto something, and that she needed to disseminate this information more widely, beyond the realm of the patients she encountered during her job as a surgeon. She decided to put all these notes that she had been writing for her patients together

into a book. In addition, she has given numerous talks, and given countless interviews for newspapers, magazines, radio and television. Her goal is to share this idea of the wholefood plant-based diet with as many people as possible, so that they understand the potential benefits and have the knowledge to make informed choices about what they eat.

## Reflections

Embarking on the road less travelled is never easy. Dr Lo has occasionally doubted her passion and wondered if it is a waste of time. Despite this, her positive thinking and determination, together with positive feedback from her patients and readers motivate her to keep going.

Dr Lo hopes to promote lifestyle medicine in academia as well, and to inspire other people to take up the challenge and enjoy the benefits of a wholefood plant-based diet. “I am confident and happy to share the message that human beings can live a radiant life without animal-based food. And it is all evidence-based!”

## References

1. Sluijs I, Beulens JW, van der A DL, et al. Dietary intake of total, animal, and vegetable protein and risk of type 2 diabetes in the European Prospective Investigation into Cancer and Nutrition (EPIC)-NL study. *Diabetes Care* 2010;33:43-8.
2. Satija A, Bhupathiraju SN, Rimm EB, et al. Plant-based dietary patterns and incidence of type 2 diabetes in US men and women: Results from three prospective cohort studies. *PLoS Med* 2016;13:e1002039.



Dr Lo (left) introduced her book 《我醫我素，健康素食小百科》 to the student reporters who interviewed her for this article (from second left): Venice, Hilary, and Joey