

- [AOL.com](#)
- [MAIL](#)
- You might also like:
 - [AOL Health](#),
 - [ParentDish](#)
 - and [More](#)

[En Español](#)

Aol Health.

[That's Fit](#)

Search Tips, News & More

- [Main](#)
- [Diet](#)
 - [Diet](#)
 - [Diet Reviews](#)
 - [Recipe Rehab with Tanya Zuckerbrot](#)
 - [Too Good To Be Food with Keri Glassman](#)
 - [Jonny's Take](#)
 - [Best Life with Bob Greene](#)
 - [SELF Meal Plans](#)
- [Fitness](#)
 - [Fitness](#)
 - [Workouts](#)
 - [Fit or Fiction](#)
 - [Fit After 40](#)
 - [Fit Family](#)
 - [Fit Travel](#)
 - [Men's Fitness](#)
 - [Running](#)
 - [Walking](#)
 - [We Tried it](#)
 - [Yoga](#)
- [Celebrity](#)
 - [Celebrity](#)
 - [Interviews](#)
 - [Biggest Loser](#)
- [Success & Motivation](#)
 - [Success & Motivation](#)
 - [Success Stories](#)
 - [Tipping the Scales](#)
- [America Takes It Off](#)
- [Experts](#)
 - [Denise Austin](#)
 - [Jonny Bowden](#)
 - [Keri Glassman](#)
 - [Mandy Ingber](#)
 - [Liz Neporent](#)
 - [Tanya Zuckerbrot](#)
 - [Tweetmixx](#)
- [Send Feedback](#)



We Tried It: Bill Clinton's Heart-Healthy Diet



Posted on Oct 29th 2010 2:00PM by [Kyle Stack](#)

Filed Under: [Diet & Weight Loss](#), [We Tried it](#)

[Email](#)



Frank Polich/ Getty Images

I'm not your typical dietary subject. After all, I'm 5-foot-10, 160 pounds, and I'm fit and lean from the time I spend in the gym. At 27 years old, I had never been on a [diet](#) -- I eat what I like and what I feel is generally healthy. Yet the way I consume food has been altered considerably after spending nine days on a heart-protective diet.

My editor approached me about trying the diet proposed by Dr. Caldwell B. Esselstyn, Jr. in his book "[Prevent and Reverse Heart Disease](#)." The diet takes seriously all the food and drinks that pose a risk to a person's long-term health, specifically [heart disease](#). In that respect, this diet is seen often as a last-ditch resort for people at risk for heart complications, among other health problems.

Former President Bill Clinton is one example. He tried the diet after undergoing a heart procedure in February, even though he had already lost weight after bypass surgery in 2004. Another reason [President Clinton turned to Dr. Esselstyn's proposed diet](#) was to lose weight in preparation for his daughter Chelsea's September wedding. He raved about it to Wolf Blitzer on his CNN show, emphasizing he had lost 24 pounds and felt great. I figured if President Clinton could show restraint, then there shouldn't be any reason I couldn't do the same.

Dr. Esselstyn's diet revolves around swearing off much of the typical Western diet. It means halting consumption of all meat, eggs, dairy products, nuts and processed foods. You read that correct. No meat. No organic chicken, no wild fish, no cold cuts. One more thing: You can't even consume oils -- not even olive oil. The items have too much fat, salt and bad cholesterol to be considered safe for long-term heart protection, according to Dr. Esselstyn. Now, take a deep breath and read what's permissible to eat.

Fruit, vegetables (except avocados, which are too fatty), whole grains and legumes. Those are the core of what I had to eat. Dr. Esselstyn's argument is that living by the standards of this diet will prevent the onset of heart disease, among other health problems.

There was some flexibility to the diet. Alternative forms of milk, such as almond milk, were fine. Maple syrup, sugar, salsa, vinegar and spices were encouraged by Dr. Esselstyn. But when I broke down the way I ate before taking on this diet, I was surprised at the number of products I couldn't touch for at least a week.

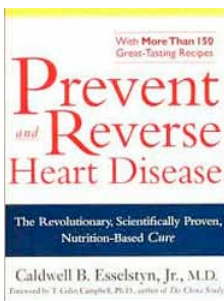
One Day Before Start

Dr. Esselstyn explained what was generally acceptable and unacceptable to consume, so I'm not worried about what to buy during my first grocery store go-around. The book also offers 150-plus recipes, so it's quite easy to form an understanding of what to buy.

I choose Fresh Direct to buy my first list of ingredients. Going to a health food store isn't necessary. Much of what I can eat and drink can be found at any regular grocery store. Places with a health food bent like Trader Joe's and Whole Foods will offer more options, but one advantage of this diet is it's relatively low-maintenance from a shopping perspective.

This is actually an ideal time of year to start a diet like this because of all the seasonal vegetables available, which include squash, yams and bell peppers. I've never been a fan of pumpkin aside from having it in pie form. I don't imagine I'll gain the motivation to bake one; I probably couldn't anyway, since frozen pie crusts are probably restricted.

I add fruit, old-fashioned oats and a few kinds of whole grain pasta to the mix. I'll buy more later, but at least now I can make salad and pasta dishes with vegetables. We'll see if that sustains me through a day. The total from the first bill is only \$35, which isn't bad considering all the produce I bought.



Amazon.com

Day 1 (Thursday)

Highlight meal: Whole wheat penne with steamed zucchini, broccoli, asparagus, garlic, baby tomatoes and onions

Alright, this is tougher than it seemed. Breakfast consisted of fruit (grapes and an orange) with a bowl of oatmeal. I traditionally have always poured milk in my oatmeal, but I go the traditional French way this time. While I wait to hit the grocery store for an alternative milk, I live with simply eating the oatmeal dry with brown sugar.

I loaded up on produce, but I'm going to have to buy more groceries. I'll need spices, rice and bread. My lack of preparation for the food I need will leave me scrounging to put meals together.

I can already tell this diet will require more preparation. I can't just quickly scrap together a peanut butter and jelly sandwich with potato chips. Making a real meal takes time. I didn't feel like taking time to make a full lunch, so I went with a basic salad and used lemon to flavor it.

Day 2 (Friday)

Highlight meal: Oatmeal with a Fuji apple and brown sugar

I start incorporating fruit into the oatmeal to liven it up. Success rings through the air. I really enjoyed this breakfast, which is so simplistic that I can't believe I hadn't tried it. I've become so used to pouring milk into cereal that I didn't let myself discover other possibilities. Now I can enjoy the taste of brown sugar and fruit with the oats. This will become a staple.

Lunch was a failure. I've yet to complete my shopping, so I'm scrambling to put lunches and dinners together. While yams provide great taste with a fantastic nutritional benefit, I should have cooked it differently than a traditional baked potato. Cutting it into cubes and then baking would've made it easier to combine with beans and other vegetables. I'm not sure if it goes with black beans really well, but I'm yearning for some protein.

The toughest part of this diet so far is ensuring I get a proper amount of protein. My intake will pick up once I do more grocery shopping tomorrow morning. In the meantime, I can't even rely on almonds or Greek yogurt for protein.

Day 3 (Saturday)

Highlight meal: Three burritos -- whole wheat tortillas, brown basmati rice, black beans, asparagus, organic spinach, red bell pepper, Mrs. Dash seasoning, roasted garlic salsa

Now we're talking. I went to Trader Joe's for another \$41 worth of groceries and added plenty of great food. Bread, couscous, beans, almond milk and frozen peas and corn give me more cooking versatility. I certainly had to pay more attention to ingredients on packaged products.

I love bread, but I couldn't get the TJ's whole grain fiber loaf (\$2.59) like I normally do. Soybean oil is included in the list of items that comprise two percent or less of its overall ingredients. In light of keeping with the program, I put that back on the shelf and went with Ezekial loaves (\$3.99 apiece), which have seemingly every sprouted grain and oat in them.

I turned down TJ's Bran Flakes because of it containing trace amounts of almonds and peanuts. However, I did grab the whole wheat tortillas, which contain sunflower oil. And I bought almond milk, which Dr. Esselstyn lists as an acceptable milk substitute despite it containing a main ingredient (almonds) which is unacceptable to eat on this diet. Go figure.

The burritos were great. It's a very easy dish to make, consisting of warming up beans, steaming vegetables, cooking the rice and quickly warming up the tortillas. I threw some spices and a few dabs of salsa in the rice, beans and vegetables once I put them on the tortilla.

Day 4 (Sunday)

Highlight meal: Oatmeal with sauteed apples coated with cinnamon

A tough, tough day to be on this diet. I travel to Philadelphia for Major League Baseball's NLCS to work on a different story. I load up with a gigantic bowl of oatmeal topped with sauteed apples covered in cinnamon. Yet the trip to Philly makes it difficult to bring much food with me. I pack only an orange and an apple. (I forgot to bring carrots.) I figured I might be able to get a salad somewhere, but I arrive in Philly later than I plan. I head to the ballpark wondering exactly what it is I'm going to eat, save for some remaining orange slices.

You might not believe this, but ballparks don't lend themselves well to people who can't consume meat, oil, dairy or refined foods. I know you're surprised. I end up saving orange slices for when I get really hungry and weather the storm until I get home later that night. As hungry as I am when I get home at 1 a.m., I decide not to eat until the next morning. I've never enjoyed eating so deep into the night, despite my frequent pizza runs on late weekend nights. I usually feel bloated the next day. My preference is to go a little hungry and load up on food in the morning.

Day 5 (Monday)

Highlight meal: Baked yam with black beans, frozen corn and roasted garlic salsa

I'm not a fan of almond milk. I still don't understand why it's permissible to drink that stuff when I can't eat almonds. I need to find out from Dr. Esselstyn. I don't feel a need for any dairy products except for milk. I've been drinking exclusively water. Fruit juices are largely dismissed in this diet except for using small quantities in recipes. Milk is really the drink I want, but almond milk does nothing to make me forget about that 1 percent milk I normally guzzle.

The yam dish was made on the fly. I baked the yam for an hour at 430 degrees, which was actually too long. Forty-five minutes would've done the job. I heated up the canned black beans and frozen corn close to when I'll remove the potato from the oven. Once the potato is finished, I scooped out its insides, mashed them, and put them back within the skin. Then I topped it with beans, corn and some garlic roasted salsa. Not a bad meal at all, and it's quite easy to make.

Day 6 (Tuesday)

Highlight meal: Brown rice with broccoli, carrots, cauliflower, basil, garlic, lemon

Perhaps I need to get more creative. I really miss chicken, fish and peanut butter. I'm trying to vary my carbohydrate intake among potatoes, pasta and rice. Yet it's still getting a little boring to pair one of those items with a bunch of vegetables. I'm not a salad kind of guy, which is what might be limiting me more than anything. Or am I limiting myself? I can't tell; all I can think about is a peanut butter sandwich and a glass of milk.

Day 7 (Wednesday)

Highlight meal: Three whole wheat tortillas with leftover black beans, corn and roasted garlic salsa

I give myself a pep talk this morning and look in the mirror. My face looks leaner. My gut is getting rounded into a four-pack, which is due partly to my workouts. Perhaps it's also attributable to the type of food I've stayed away from.

Going without dairy and processed food seems to have had an effect on my appearance. My skin looks a little bit fresher. I already mentioned my face and stomach are leaner. What I haven't mentioned yet, and what really needs to be aired since I've been on this diet for a week, is that my energy level has changed.

I noticed this two days ago but didn't really think about it until now. My energy is consistent from when I wake up at 7 a.m. until I go to bed at 12 or 1 a.m.. The only time I feel fatigued is when I lift weights, which I suspect is an effect of not consuming enough protein, specifically animal protein. But I'm still able to get through most of the day without crashing. Now, I don't drink coffee. Never have and don't plan on doing so anytime soon. I don't like the idea of relying on it to wake me up. I drink just water and have been trying to avoid too much fruit. Dr. Esselstyn warns an excessive amount of sugar could be consumed if I went on a fruit salad assault.

I'm very pleased with the increased energy, though, and it's beginning to make me think I might change some aspects of my long-term diet whenever this project ends. Feeling good all day outweighs satisfying those binge cravings. First on the list might be sticking with Ezekial bread, which has the added benefit of smelling fantastic when toasted.

Day 8 (Thursday)

Highlight meal: Plate of spaghetti with broccoli, cauliflower, red bell peppers, zucchini, onions, garlic, tomato sauce

My goal to stay on this diet for 10 days is looking grim. I'm going out with friends tomorrow night for the first time in a week. It's been a long, long work week, which has had interesting timing with this diet. Despite my increased work and need to concentrate, I feel weirdly energetic. I'm really digging the benefit of removing all that processed food and sticking with whole grains. There's something else to rave about.

My sinus problems have cleared up. I've had ongoing sinus issues for a couple years. I started getting allergies after I moved to New York City from Montana in June 2007. My allergies have become progressively worse each year, which I attributed to my negative reaction to the city's smog. However, my mom pointed out it could be that my sinuses have cleared since I'm no longer consuming dairy products. It's certainly a reasonable theory since I consume milk, butter and yogurt on a regular basis.

Day 9 (Friday)

Highlight meal: Three pieces of French toast with maple syrup

There are only so many consecutive days one can eat oatmeal, so I go with a sweeter-tasting breakfast. I chop up a banana and mash it and add a healthy amount of almond milk, cinnamon and vanilla extract into a bowl. I scramble that, dip the bread into it and throw the bread slice onto a hot pan. Since the banana was broken into small chunks within the mix, I run the mix through a strainer and spread the chunks of banana over the French toast pieces when they're done. Then I top with maple syrup.

I do fine during the day, but I still find myself craving a slice of pizza. I go out to a bar for Happy Hour but hold off on food. It's not until I get out of the bar several hours later that I resign myself to the fact I really want a slice. So, I end up getting an entire pie. Hey, it's been a good ride. However, I live in New York City; enjoying a good pizza every now and then is practically a prerequisite to living here.

Most folks might think the diet is too restrictive after taking a first look at it. That understandable when someone discovers meat and dairy aren't allowed. I found the transition difficult, but that's also because I have limited kitchen space with a very limited amount of kitchen tools. But I feel that if I, a healthy 27-year-old single guy living in New York City, can focus on just fruits, vegetables, whole grains and legumes, then it should be possible for lots of other people.

Eating in this manner really made me feel better. I had more energy, my sinuses cleared and I felt leaner. My weight loss wasn't significant. I weighed 159 before the diet and clocked in at 156 on Saturday. I imagine this diet would work very well for someone looking to lose weight. Eating produce and whole grains is as natural a way to eat as can be done in a reasonable manner.

However, I do have a couple issues. I understand that I'm not exactly the perfect test subject for this. It is aimed in the direction of people in their 40s and older who have serious health conditions. But to say that any meat, eggs, dairy, oil, nuts or refined food is unacceptable is a little too restrictive. Dr. Esselstyn goes as far as to call much of that food "toxic" at various points of his book. I understand his point, but never eating any of those foods is unrealistic. [Bill Clinton was reportedly seen eating a steak](#) while traveling abroad four months ago.

Life is about experiences, and part of those experiences include the food you eat. A more idealistic person might think life is too short not to take advantage of the many incredible flavors that can be experienced from eating an array of food, from grilled salmon to pizza to cheesecake. Maybe Dr. Esselstyn has scientific evidence on his side, that this diet is healthier, but there are lots of things in life that can be harmful. Walking across the street carries risk. Enjoying a steak or drinking milk shouldn't be viewed as toxic, especially if it's done on occasion.

That said, I do plan on making changes as a result of this diet. I don't imagine I can eliminate dairy entirely, but I'm going to start by dropping cream cheese and butter. I'll try to hold myself to three Greek yogurts per week -- its protein content is valuable -- and I'm going to drink far less milk. I can't give up eggs, so I'll continue to eat those. I had already given up pork and most red meat earlier this year, so that won't be a problem. Yet organic chicken, wild fish, peanut butter and almonds are reasonable to eat.

Where I think the biggest change might come from is in processed foods. Ezekial loaves of bread will become my chosen option over the processed bread I used to buy. I'll stick with brown rice over white, and whole wheat pasta is the only way for me to go. I will do my best to keep tortilla and potato chips out of my kitchen. I don't miss them, anyway.

I encourage anyone looking for a healthier way to eat -- or a way to feel better physically -- to consider going on this diet. Try a week on it. It might seem like a boring way to eat as you buy groceries, but the beautiful part of this diet is that it forces you to become more creative in your food preparation. Food should never be an afterthought. It should be exciting. People can create their own little form of art with the dishes they make. Try Dr. Esselstyn's diet for a week and see how you feel physically. You just might want to extend it after noticing the positive physical and mental changes this diet inspires.

More We Tried It:

[Baby Food Diet](#)

[UltraSimple Diet](#)

[Dr. Oz's 10 Commandments for Weight Loss](#)