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NFL Star Reshapes His Diet

Article By: Kyle Stack

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football.

Gonzalez, 33, spent his first 10 NFL seasons feeding his 6'5", 250ish-pound frame with cheeseburgers, pizza and other junk food. It didn't affect his on-field productivity his first eight campaigns, but as he entered his thirties in 2005–2006, foot and shoulder injuries began to weaken his effectiveness. "My body was aching, and I thought I was slowing down physically," Gonzalez says.

In early 2007, Gonzalez was diagnosed with Bell's palsy, a condition that causes temporary partial facial paralysis. Within a month of contracting Bell's palsy, from which he fully recovered, Gonzalez found himself in another medical quagmire. After routine blood work, he was mistakenly informed that a low white-blood-cell count indicated he had leukemia. "I started crying about it by myself when I was driving on the freeway," Gonzalez says.

It took 45 minutes from the time he was told the news for the doctor to discover the blood-work results were from someone else; Gonzalez was fine. Still, he was hit with a reality check. "It made me realize that I needed to take better care of myself," Gonzalez admits.

Determined to stave off his body's

Tony Gonzalez changes his food habits to extend his career

Atlanta Falcons tight end Tony Gonzalez spent the first decade of his NFL career racking up Hall of Fame-worthy numbers. Yet a series of injuries and a blood mix-up scare in 2007 made the then-Kansas City Chief evaluate the best way to extend his career. He decided it was by implementing a plant-based diet, which he adjusted to satisfy the 175 grams of protein per day he needed to play

Tony Gonzalez made plenty of substitutions in his diet as he gravitated to healthier foods. Here are some examples:

He used to eat loads of cheese but now consumes it only occasionally. When he does, he opts for white cheese, since it's typically not processed to the degree yellow cheese is.

Farm-raised fish may contain higher amounts of mercury and other chemicals, which is why Gonzalez opts for wild fish. Even then, he has rules about what he consumes. He avoids mercury-prone swordfish and tuna and instead chooses salmon, trout and branzino.

He'll still order a hamburger at a restaurant but will get it without ketchup, which is typically processed. "And instead of fries, order some fruit."

Looking for a healthy addition to your smoothies? Gonzalez loves acai, a Brazilian fruit that can be bought frozen or included in a pre-mixed smoothie pack. "They're delicious and really good for you."

Gonzalez loves pasta but he'll choose



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aches and to ward off potential diseases, Gonzalez adopted veganism. He figured there was no harm in trying it, then going in another direction if it didn't work. He delved into it after reading T. Colin Campbell and Thomas M. Campbell II's *The China Study*, which promotes a vegan diet. "I felt great," Gonzalez says. "If you had to put a grade scale on it, that is the A+ diet."

tomato sauce instead of Alfredo sauce. For his salad, he'll pick olive oil or balsamic vinaigrette rather than ranch dressing.



However, he quickly noticed the lack of animal protein wasn't conducive to his job as a pro football player. After a month as a vegan, he consulted with former NBA strength coach Jon Hinds, who advised that he incorporate fish and chicken on occasion. Chiefs dietitian Mitzi Dulan, RD, CSSD, took it a step further. She urged Gonzalez to consume more meat while valuing the plant-based foods he ate. "My concern was protein intake," says Dulan, who coauthored *The All-Pro Diet* (Rodale Books, 2009) with Gonzalez to explain his new eating style.

A reintroduction to eating meat full-time made Gonzalez hesitant in one respect. For someone looking to make healthier choices, leaner meats such as fish, chicken and lean cold cuts made more sense. Now, Gonzalez eats red meat once per month. He has wild fish, typically salmon, at least once per day and free-range chicken every other day.

He cut out processed foods — Dulan convinced him to drop processed vegan foods, too, which she considers barely a step up from junk food — lowered his consumption of dairy products and stepped up his intake of fruits and vegetables, at Dulan's recommendation.

"Instead of the A+ diet, I was going for the B+ diet," Gonzalez says, meaning he ate healthy but not quite to his ideal standard. A plant-based diet made him feel great, but he needed animal protein to maintain his strength. In that respect, it was essential for him to understand what the sources were for his food.

The *China Study* wasn't his only form of education. Gonzalez plowed through other nutrition books and watched documentaries on the nation's food industry, such as *Food, Inc.* Dulan implored him to read food labels. Gonzalez's knowledge about what was healthy and what wasn't took off from there. "It's mind-boggling how uneducated people are about their food sources," Gonzalez says. "I was one of those people. And a lot of people don't want to know where their food comes from because they're scared of what they might find out."

Teammates mocked Gonzalez during his conversion to veganism by nicknaming him "China Study." Yet his ability to remain one of the NFL's elite tight ends into his thirties made him believe his peers would see the value in healthy eating.

"I'm feeling great, and I feel a lot better than I did after Year 10," Gonzalez says. "It's because of what I put into my body."

About the Writer

Kyle Stack has also discovered the benefits of a plant-based diet. However, he's found an occasional pizza or cheeseburger is too good to pass up. He is a New York-based writer who contributes to SLAMonline, Wired.com and ESPN the Magazine.

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