

GO DEEPER HEALTH | HOLISTIC HIGH PERFORMANCE HEALTH™



THE COMBINATION PRINCIPLE

THE CRUX OF PLANT-BASED EATING

A FOUNDATIONAL GUIDE TO NATURAL WHOLE-FOOD
PLANT-BASED DIET

FOUNDATIONS FIRST

01

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BEFORE YOU BEGIN

What This Guide Is — and What It Isn't

This guide explains one foundation clearly: that whole-food plant-based eating works as well as it does **because of how foods are combined** to create a well-rounded, nutritionally dense diet with potentially favourable metabolic outcomes. It is written from a first-principles perspective — but it does not simplify the science away; it explains the mechanism, the historical context, and the practical application, in that order, as an insightful guide, not an instruction manual.

WHAT IS A GUIDE?

A guide is a tool for understanding and is limited by design — It is educational by nature, not advisory.

This guide is:

- A first-principles explanation of the *nutrient matrix* concept — why food combinations matter biologically, before any specific foods are introduced.
- An insightful guide, not an instruction manual — research-informed, empirical information not a directive.
- Relevant to both men and women, with any specific nutritional notes flagged explicitly.
- Grounded in both modern nutritional science and long-standing traditional systems, including Ayurveda.

This guide is not:

- A meal plan, calorie target, or supplement protocol.
- A claim that plant-based eating is the only valid way to eat, or that it suits every individual or health condition.

- Medical advice, a diagnosis tool, or a substitute for individualised clinical guidance.
- Affiliated with any product, supplement brand, or commercial nutrition programme — where any such affiliation does exist, it will be clearly detailed.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

Read it in order. Each page builds on the last — starting with the core principle, moving through the science of why it works, the traditional systems that have applied it for centuries, and finally, what it can look like in ordinary daily practice. Understanding precedes application.

DISCLAIMER

The information in this guide is framed with the generally healthy adult in mind; individual needs vary with age, life phase, medication, and health status. The information here is for educational and informational purposes only and does not constitute medical or professional advice. Reading this material does not establish a formal practitioner-client relationship. Consult a licensed healthcare or medical professional for personal medical concerns.

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Combination Is the Crux

There is one factor that consistently shows up as central to whether a whole-food plant-based way of eating delivers on its potential: **combination**. But "combination" often gets overshadowed by narratives that emphasise deficiency, and that framing typically sets the tone for everything understood afterward.

Not combination in the casual sense of "eat a variety of vegetables" — combination as a structured nutritional principle. It refers to the intentional pairing of foods and food groups in a way that creates what is known as a **nutrient matrix** (or matrices): a functional interaction between compounds that changes how well the body can absorb, utilise, and benefit from what is eaten. This is a fundamental reason why plant-based nutrition is highly regarded within holistic health traditions.

This distinction matters because much of the general recognition around plant-based eating treats it as a single, uniform category — as though "plant-based" automatically means nutritionally complete, or conversely, automatically means deficient. Neither is the full picture. Nutrient composition does matter, though that emphasis isn't always understood; here, the combination principle is treated as a first-principles starting point — one that reframes how a plant-based diet is understood to nourish the person eating it. The outcome depends almost entirely on **how** the foods are combined, not merely on the fact that they are plant-derived.

That said, some plant-based sources are popularly described as "superfoods" — an informal classification for foods carrying an unusually high concentration of nutrients, antioxidants, or phytonutrients relative to their calories. This is worth knowing, as nutrient density is itself another dimension of combination.

Why this is the right starting point

Information on plant-based eating typically starts with food lists — what to eat and what to avoid — without delving into the core factors behind optimised plant-based eating. This guide starts with the mechanism first, because understanding *why* combination matters makes every later decision easier and more intuitive. Once the principle is clear, the specific food pairings become details rather than rules to memorise.

A well-applied whole-food plant-based approach is not defined by the absence of animal products — it is defined by the deliberate combination of plant foods to maximise nutrient availability, to the best of the food's ability.

The remainder of this guide examines that sentence from a holistic viewpoint: what "whole-food" specifically excludes, how the nutrient matrix functions biologically, what combination looks like at the plate level, and how much older systems of medicine — particularly Ayurveda — built this exact principle into their dietary frameworks, in ways that align with what modern nutritional science now describes of its nutritive, therapeutic, and broadly health-supportive value.

Whole-Food Plant-Based, Not Just "Plant-Based"

Before discussing combination, one distinction needs to be made clearly: this guide refers specifically to **whole-food** sources — legumes, vegetables, fruits, whole grains, nuts, and seeds. It does not refer to the growing category of ultra-processed foods that carry a "plant-based" label but lack the nutritional architecture that makes the approach meaningful.

A plant-based burger patty, a packaged plant-based snack bar, or a heavily refined plant-based "meal replacement" can be technically free of animal products while offering very little of the fibre, phytonutrient density, or combination potential that whole foods provide. The label "plant-based" describes an ingredient category — it does not, on its own, describe nutritional quality.

This guide's emphasis throughout is on the key factors within a plant-based eating pattern that translate into health-supportive value.

A simple way to think about it

- Whole-food plant-based: a food that resembles the plant it came from, minimally processed, with its fibre and micronutrient structure largely intact.
- Plant-based-labelled: a packaged product engineered to mimic animal-derived foods, often through significant processing, refined oils, isolated proteins, and additives.

This guide's claims about therapeutic value, anti-inflammatory potential, and nutrient synergy apply to the first category. They should not be assumed to transfer automatically to the second. From this point on, **"plant-based" refers to whole-food plant-based** eating as defined above, unless stated otherwise.

WHY THIS MATTERS EARLY ON

It is entirely possible to eat in a way that is technically "plant-based" while missing most of the benefit this guide describes. The combination principle that follows only functions properly when applied to whole, minimally processed foods.

The Nutrient Matrix: How Combination Works

The term **nutrient matrix** describes how nutrients behave differently in the context of whole foods and food combinations than they do in isolation. It also describes how the compounds within a single food interact with one another — a matrix-like effect that shapes the outcome on metabolism.

Take a ripe, organically grown banana. Its composition — fibre, bulk, vitamins, and carbohydrates — exists as an integrated whole, not a list of separate parts. When eaten and metabolised, these components interact together through digestion, producing food energy alongside the full complement of nutrients the banana carries. Isolating a single compound from that banana removes it from this whole-food matrix effect — and understanding why that distinction matters is central to the crux of plant-based eating. A nutrient's presence on a label does not guarantee its absorption — bioavailability depends heavily on what else is present at the same meal.

Three mechanisms worth understanding

01	Nutrient composition & complementary completeness.	As the banana example shows, a whole food's nutrients exist together as a composition, not a list of isolated parts. That same logic extends across foods: plant protein sources individually may be lower in one or more essential amino acids, but drawing across a varied protein base over the course of a day — rather than relying on a single source — supports a complete amino acid profile.
02	Antinutrient mitigation.	Some plant compounds, such as phytates and oxalates, can reduce mineral absorption when eaten alone in large amounts. Soaking, cooking, fermenting, and combining with other foods reduces their inhibitory effect.
03	Absorption enhancers.	Certain compounds increase the body's ability to absorb a nutrient when eaten together — the clearest example being vitamin C improving the absorption of non-haem iron (the form of iron found in plants).

None of these mechanisms are exotic or require precise calculation at every meal. They describe tendencies that, applied consistently and loosely across a varied diet, produce a meaningfully more nutritionally complete pattern of eating than an unvaried or poorly combined one. This matters more broadly, too: poor nutritional quality and deficient food composition are

increasingly recognised as a contributor to malnutrition in modern, developed-world diets — a pattern that shows up as both undernutrition and overnutrition, not one or the other.

THE DEFICIENCY NARRATIVE, REFRAMED

A frequent claim is that plant-based diets are inherently deficient. A more accurate framing: a plant-based approach that is **poorly planned** — narrow, repetitive, lacking variety and combination — can create real gaps. That is a function of *application*, not an inherent property of eating plants. Good application is, in large part, what this guide is about.

Combination at the Plate Level

The principle becomes far more useful once it is grounded in ordinary, repeatable examples. None of the following are rules — they are illustrations of the combination principle applied at a foundational level, each one an example of a complementary nutrient matrix in practice.

Legumes + Vitamin-C-rich vegetables Lentils, chickpeas, or beans paired with yellow, red, orange bell peppers or leafy greens supports non-haem iron absorption meaningfully.	Grains + Legumes (across the day) Rice with lentils, or wholegrain quinoa with a bean, draws on complementary amino acid profiles for a more complete protein pattern.
Healthy fats + Fat-soluble nutrients Carotenoids (in carrots, leafy greens, sweet potato) are better absorbed with a source of fat — olive oil, nuts, seeds, or avocado.	Variety across the week, not one meal Rotating legumes, grains, vegetables, nuts, and seeds across days — rather than repeating the same narrow set — is itself a form of combination.

The operating principle is variety and intention. Combination does not need to be restrictive but rather better engineered to be effective — it needs to be present consistently across the broader pattern of how you eat.

AN EFFECTIVE START

If this feels like a lot to track at first, it is enough to start with one habit: include a natural vitamin C source whenever eating an iron-rich legume, and rotate protein sources throughout the week rather than repeating the same one daily.

The B12 and Vitamin D3 Question

A foundational guide to plant-based eating is more useful for naming its limits plainly than for glossing over them. Two nutrients, vitamin B12 and vitamin D3, are worth understanding clearly: both are genuine, specific considerations within a whole-food plant-based pattern — not myths, and not something the combination principle on its own resolves.

This is different from the broader pattern discussed earlier. Iron, protein completeness, and many other nutrients respond well to combination and variety across a varied diet. B12 and D3 behave differently — each benefits from its own informed, deliberate attention, regardless of how well-combined the rest of the diet is.

Vitamin B12

Based on current-day recognition, Vitamin B12 is not reliably present in most plant foods, which makes it worth planning for rather than assuming. Two approaches are commonly used, often in combination:

- **Natural supplementation, where needed.** A B12 supplement or fortification is the most studied and widely relied-upon route for a strict or long-term whole-food plant-based pattern. Here, it's worth considering whether the source is natural or synthetic, particularly for a longer-term approach.
- **A plant-and-organic-dairy approach.** Some individuals retain a smaller place for wholesome, organic dairy within a primarily plant-based pattern — organic dairy can offer a natural source of B12, alongside other nutrients.

A NOTE ON "FORTIFICATION"

Not all fortification is the same. Synthetic fortification adds an isolated, lab-produced nutrient to a food (as with most fortified plant milks). **Food-to-food fortification (FtFF)** and **organic biofortification** work differently — they raise a food's nutrient content through how it is grown, combined, or processed naturally, rather than by adding an isolated compound. A simple example of FtFF is pairing an iron-rich legume with a vitamin-C-rich vegetable at the same meal (covered earlier in this guide) — the food combination itself does the work that an isolated additive would otherwise need to do.

Vitamin D3

Vitamin D3 presents a related, separate consideration. It is synthesised by the body primarily through sensible sun exposure, and is otherwise found mainly in animal-derived sources — meaning it, too, benefits from a deliberate approach within a plant-based pattern. Common routes include:

- **Natural supplementation.** A D3 supplement — including natural plant-derived (lichen) forms suited to a plant-based pattern — is a well-studied way to maintain adequate levels, particularly with limited sun exposure.
- **Accounting for less sun or winter months.** D3 synthesis depends on sun exposure, so it naturally drops with shorter days, winter months, higher latitudes, or limited time outdoors — periods when supplementation or fortified sources become more relevant, regardless of how the rest of the diet is composed.

No single approach is presented here as superior to another — the right choice depends on personal agency, health status, climate, and practical circumstances, such as routine blood testing for vitamin B12 and D levels. What matters is that B12 and D3 are treated as known, manageable variables, considered with the same care given to the rest of the diet, rather than overlooked.

A NOTE ON SUPPLEMENTATION

Any decision around supplementation — including B12 and vitamin D3 — should be based on individual status confirmed through appropriate testing, not general assumption, with a qualified healthcare provider consulted wherever possible. Timing matters just as much as the decision to supplement: whether something is taken continuously, on and off on a schedule, tapered, or cycled over time is its own consideration, intended to avoid unintended consequences such as nutrient build-up.

This Is Not a New Idea

It is worth recognising plainly: plant-centred, combination-aware eating is not a modern construct. Essentially, vegetables, fruits, seeds, nuts, and beans have been applied in various forms across some of the oldest and most carefully observed health traditions in human history.

Ayurveda

Ayurvedic sciences, one of the oldest continuously documented health systems in the world, hold a rich history around plant foods — with a specific, longstanding emphasis on food combination as a determinant of digestive function and therapeutic outcome. Concepts such as *virudhha ahara* (incompatible food combining) and seasonal eating reflect a sophisticated, centuries-old understanding that how foods are paired affects the body's ability to process and benefit from them — a principle modern nutritional science now describes in the language of bioavailability and the nutrient matrix.

Traditional Chinese Medicine

Traditional Chinese Medicine applied a similarly combination-based logic across millennia, pairing roots, seeds, grains, and herbs with the understanding that their combined effect exceeded the sum of their individual parts — a precursor, in practice, to what is now studied formally as nutrient synergy.

The Okinawan tradition

The Okinawan dietary pattern — associated with one of the highest recorded longevity rates of any population — was predominantly plant-based, built on a diverse and varied base of vegetables, legumes, and whole grains. The principle of combination was embedded structurally in the pattern of eating, even without being named as such.

WHY THIS MATTERS TODAY

Modern science increasingly recognises this nutrient synergy and the value of whole-food combinations — in many respects, explaining the mechanism behind something traditional systems applied empirically and successfully for a very long time. Partly, this is also due to the growing health burdens associated with industrialised Western diets. This convergence

between traditional observation and modern evidence is part of what gives this approach its depth.

A Tool, Not a Prescription — For Men and Women

Whole-food plant-based eating does not have to be permanent, absolute, or applied identically by everyone. For some, it becomes a long-term lifestyle orientation. For others, it functions as a structured phase — used to reduce inflammatory load, support digestive recovery, or work toward specific metabolic or cardiovascular goals, before being adjusted again. Context, health status, and personal goals determine how it is applied. It is, fundamentally, a non-prescriptive tool, not a fixed identity.

Considerations relevant to both sexes

The combination principle — pairing iron with vitamin C, rotating protein sources, supporting fat-soluble nutrient absorption, and giving B12 explicit attention — applies equally to generally healthy adult men and women, to different degrees. There is no version of "combination" that differs by sex; the underlying biology of basic whole-plant-food absorption and bioavailability is generally shared — beetroot, for example, can be consumed by any generally healthy adult, based on suitability — but variables apply because each individual has unique dietary requirements shaped by their own biochemistry. For instance, one individual may need proportionately more food than another due to training routines — proportionality matters.

Where individual differences matter

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|---------------------|--|
| — Iron needs | are generally higher for menstruating women, which makes consistent iron-and-vitamin-C combination practice particularly relevant — not because plant-based eating is uniquely risky for women, but because baseline iron requirements differ. |
| — Life phase | — pregnancy, breastfeeding, adolescence, and older adulthood — changes nutrient requirements for anyone, regardless of dietary pattern, and warrants individualised guidance from a healthcare provider rather than general assumptions. |
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— **Activity level and body composition goals**

may shift protein and energy targets for either sex, but do not change the underlying combination principles described in this guide.

In short: the science of combination is universal. The specific application — how much, how often, with what additional attention — is individual, and best refined with appropriately qualified guidance where relevant.

Common Early Pitfalls

Most of the difficulties people encounter early with plant-based eating trace back to a small, predictable set of patterns. Recognising them early makes the combination principle far easier to apply consistently.

— Relying on "plant-based" packaging.	Substituting animal products with heavily processed plant-based alternatives, while skipping the whole foods that make the approach nutritionally meaningful.
— Eating the same narrow rotation repeatedly.	A small, unvaried set of foods — even if individually healthy — limits the range of nutrients and combinations available.
— Ignoring B12 by assumption.	Assuming that "eating well" automatically covers B12, when it specifically does not, without fortification or supplementation.
— Under-eating overall.	Whole-plant foods, depending on the method/type, can be less energy-dense; individuals sometimes under-eat without realising it, particularly if portions aren't adjusted, or nutrient mix is not accounted for.
— Treating it as all-or-nothing.	Abandoning the approach entirely after one inconsistent week, rather than treating consistency over time — not perfection at each meal — as the real standard.

THE UNDERLYING THEME

Almost every common pitfall is a failure of variety or attention, not a flaw in the underlying approach. This is the same point made earlier about the deficiency narrative — it returns here because it is, in practice, the most important idea in this entire guide.

Summary of Key Takeaways

Having covered the mechanism, the history, and the common pitfalls, it's worth consolidating the core ideas into one place before moving into the evidence behind them.

- **Combination is the crux.** Whole-food plant-based eating works as well as it does because of how foods are combined — not simply because they are plant-derived.
- **Whole-food, not plant-based-labelled.** The benefits described in this guide apply to minimally processed whole foods, not to ultra-processed products that merely carry a "plant-based" label.
- **The nutrient matrix is real.** Nutrients behave differently in combination than in isolation — absorption, antinutrient mitigation, and protein completeness all depend on what is eaten together.
- **B12 and D3 are known, manageable variables.** Neither is resolved by combination alone; both warrant deliberate attention, whether through supplementation, fortification, or a plant-and-organic-dairy approach.
- **This is not a new idea.** Ayurveda, Traditional Chinese Medicine, and the Okinawan tradition applied combination-aware, plant-centred eating — an approach modern science increasingly describes in its own terms, particularly amid the health burdens of industrialised diets.
- **It is a flexible tool, not a fixed identity.** The approach can be a long-term lifestyle or a structured phase, and applies to men and women alike, with individual differences accounted for rather than ignored.
- **Most pitfalls come from inattention, not flaw.** Narrow rotation, under-eating, and assuming B12 is automatically covered are failures of application — not evidence that the approach itself doesn't work.

WHERE TO GO FROM HERE

Understanding has come first, as intended. What follows next is the evidence this guide has drawn on throughout — the references that substantiate the science behind each of the points

above.

References & Further Reading

This guide draws on Go Deeper Health | Holistic High Performance Health's CMA professional-certification and empirical knowledge, alongside available published research and scientific literature. The three references below were selected specifically to illustrate how modern science demonstrates the combination principle, the nuanced B12 question, and the broader therapeutic case for whole-food plant-based eating, within its limitations.

Reference 01

Nutrient synergy: definition, evidence, and future directions

Townsend, J. R., Kirby, T. O., Sapp, P. A., Gonzalez, A. M., Marshall, T. M., & Esposito, R. — *Frontiers in Nutrition*, 10, 1279925 (2023)

Examines the nutrient-matrix and combination principle — defining nutrient synergy and reviewing evidence that nutrients eaten together can have a combined effect greater than in isolation.

Reference 02

Vitamin B-12 Intake from Dairy but Not Meat Is Associated with Decreased Risk of Low Vitamin B-12 Status and Deficiency in Older Adults from Quebec, Canada

Huang, H. H., Cohen, A. A., Gaudreau, P., Auray-Blais, C., Allard, D., Boutin, M., Reid, I., Turcot, V., & Presse, N. — *The Journal of Nutrition*, 152(11), 2483 (2022)

A research source on plant-and-organic-dairy approach to B12 — finding dairy-sourced B12 (not meat) was associated with lower risk of deficiency in older adults.

Reference 03

Systematic review and meta-analysis of the associations of vegan and vegetarian diets with inflammatory biomarkers

Menzel, J., Jabakhanji, A., Biemann, R., Mai, K., Abraham, K., & Weikert, C. — *Scientific Reports*, 10, 21736 (2020)

Examines anti-inflammatory case — a meta-analysis of 21 studies finding lower CRP in vegan and vegetarian diets than omnivorous ones, while noting the association did not extend to all inflammatory markers.

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