

## [ FOOD POLITICS ]

VEGAN ON THE  
CAMPAIGN TRAIL

The odds seem stacked against Ohio Congressman Dennis Kucinich becoming our first vegan president. But a few years ago who would have predicted he'd marry an Englishwoman 31 years his junior? Here, Elizabeth Kucinich—who admits to indulging occasionally in dairy—discusses the couple's diet at home and on the campaign trail.

**How much of you and your husband's decision to live a vegan lifestyle is influenced by sustainability issues?**

**EK:** I think it's a combination of three things. One is compassion. A vegan diet is in line with what we're trying to create in the world. Equal to that is sustainability. We understand feeding all of our plant-based foods to animals is an inefficient way of feeding people. Then there's health. We're constantly traveling through different time zones. The vegan diet just gives us energy. We're not trying to convert anyone, but we do talk about the benefits of the choices we've made.

**How do you two eat at home? Who does the cooking?**

**EK:** Dennis makes breakfast. He's an oatmeal fan. He eats it for breakfast with nuts and dried fruits and whole-wheat toast. But I do the cooking, normally. My mother taught me to cook from an early age. Dennis's favorite is pasta, but I like grains and nutty things. Couscous. Lots of vegetables. Dennis also loves going to the Middle Eastern store. He likes hummus, baba ghanoush and all those wonderful Arabian dishes.



**Is it difficult to find good vegan food on the campaign trail?**

**EK:** We have what we call a vegan underground network, with people who pop up at events with wonderful home-cooked meals and packed lunches. But it can be difficult in certain states. In those cases we have spaghetti with olive oil and garlic. —Calvin Hennick

## [ TREND ON TRIAL ]

## HELLO STANOLS, HELLO STEROLS!

When your cholesterol levels run high, many favorite foods are forbidden. Butter, whole milk, full-fat cheese, milk chocolate: all out. But now, some of these same foods—and others, like granola bars and yogurt—are being fortified with cholesterol-lowering plant chemicals called sterols and stanols. (The term “phytosterols” includes both.)

**PROS:** Phytosterols have no taste, odor or negative mouthfeel, so manufacturers have no qualms about fortifying foods with them. “Plant stanols and sterols have the same structure as cholesterol, so they compete for absorption in the intestine with cholesterol produced by the body and that which we get from food,” says Jenna Bell-Wilson, Ph.D., R.D., a nutrition consultant in Arlington,

Massachusetts—and they win. Studies confirm these powerful plant substances reduce cholesterol levels by up to 15 percent, a level that could translate into a 20 percent lower risk of heart attack or stroke. A 2006 report in the *Journal of the American College of Nutrition* found that consuming spreads fortified with 1.8 to 2.8 grams of sterols/stanols per day for one to three months lowered cholesterol by seven to 11 percent. Other studies have found similar reductions after just two weeks of daily consumption of 2 grams of stanols.

**CONS:** You need to eat foods fortified with sterols or stanols daily—for the rest of your life—to see lasting results. And while sterols/stanols themselves aren't high in calories, they're often incorporated into spreads and other high-calorie foods. Even if the phytosterols *might* mitigate the unhealthy fats in these foods, you can't ignore high calorie contents, says cardiologist Philip Ades, M.D., author of *Eating-Well for a Healthy Heart Cookbook* (April 2008). His advice: “If you choose to add sterols and stanols to your diet, get them in the lowest-calorie package possible—particularly since up to 20 percent of people with high cholesterol fail to show improvement with phytosterols.”

**BOTTOM LINE:** To get the most cholesterol-lowering impact from phytosterol-spiked foods, eat two to four servings daily. “A plant-sterol-fortified soft margarine is good to try,” says Bell-Wilson. “Cooking with it instead of butter can dramatically reduce your saturated fat intake.” Substituting milk or yogurt products with phytosterol-fortified versions is also a good idea. A 2004 study in the *European Journal of Clinical Nutrition* found that drinking plant sterol-fortified low-fat milk dropped cholesterol almost three times more than eating sterol-enriched bread or cereal. —Amy Paturel

Trace amounts of sterols and stanols are found naturally in corn, rice, apples, bananas, tomatoes and nuts.

But YOU WOULD HAVE TO EAT ABOUT 13 CUPS OF ALMONDS (7,000 CALORIES) TO REACH THE 2 GRAMS A DAY REQUIRED to see a cholesterol change.

