

Changing one's diet for some can be like a religious conversion.

Welcome to SBH Bronx Health Talk produced by SBH Health System and broadcast from the beautiful studios at St Barnabas Hospital in the Bronx. I'm Steven Clark.

Veganism excludes meat, eggs, dairy products, and all other animal-derived ingredients. Many vegans also don't eat foods that are processed using animal products such as refined white sugar and wines. With us today to discuss his personal journey as a vegan is Dr. Eric Applebaum, the chief medical officer of SBH Health System. Welcome Dr. Applebaum.

Thanks for having me Steve. It's good to be here.

So I assume you didn't wake up one morning and say gee I think I want to be a vegan.

No not at all. Actually I don't even truly characterize myself as a vegan. I like to think of myself more as someone just eating a healthy plant-based lifestyle. As you know, veganism does come with a lot of political, cultural sort of views that may be misunderstood by some, but for me the way it started was pretty early in my career as a physician and as an athlete I used to be very involved in extensive training as an Ironman triathlete. I ran marathons and I always knew you had to eat well to perform well. Couple that with being a primary care physician in addition to an emergency medicine physician teaching people how to be healthy. It wasn't a huge jump in my sort of mindset to really go all-in on eating healthy.

But again I'm guessing that you did a good amount of research before you decided to jump in, right?

Yeah I've absolutely always believed in trying to find the science behind any choices we make in our health care. You know when I'm in the office with the patient I'm presenting sort of what the evidence shows and it's a partnership. You really try and get to what a patient's core beliefs are and would be best for them I think with nutrition depending on what kind of patient you're talking to there's

some real easy choices. No one's gonna really have a big argument that smoking you know so it kills people and causes cancer. No one's gonna argue when I say we really need to get a certain amount of exercise, but when you start to get into diet it starts to get a little bit more complicated. I'd say for me it's pretty easy on a day-to-day basis to promote fruits and vegetables adding, that to our diet, but when you start telling people "Hey maybe we just eliminate all other sources of protein besides sort of a plant-based" it gets a little bit tricky.

Historically, did you immediately did you eat a lot of meat?

No I wasn't. I'm not I'm not a big eater in general. I'm definitely one more one of those that you described as eat to live rather than live to eat. Much to you know sort of dismay of my grandmas and my mom I wasn't a huge eater as always remain sort of on the slender side and that's just fortunate genetics and just how were made up it's not a belief system it's just who I was. So no, not a big meat-eater. I did eat burgers and hot dogs you know at holidays and it's barbecues and that sort of thing but it wasn't a tremendous jump. I think the bigger challenge was making sure I got plenty of vegetables and plenty of fruit into my diet.

Well let's discuss again your diet today. What is it comprised of?

So after doing lots of research I really went in on sort of a whole food plant-based diet and it's a little different. I definitely make sure I get plenty of servings of different types of dark leafy greens today, lots of whole grains, nuts and seeds, and remember you got to really discuss this with your doctor because there are certain medical conditions and certain folks who can't do that but we're talking about me specifically. Lotts of fruits and for me sort of unlimited amounts so I'm not counting calories you know. Within reason I get an idea, but what I'm getting I'm tracking it just for health reasons and to make sure I'm getting the right vitamins and minerals. But for the most part it's just a whole lot of fruit vegetables and the protein sources are gonna come basically from a lot of the plant-based sources I've incorporated. Some tempeh and some tofu into my diet, but for the most part ya it's a whole lot of fruit and vegetables.

So you're not eating any meat and eat chicken and fish?

At the beginning so you know I've been doing it five six months now maybe I did do a little bit of fish and if I'm out to eat and there's really just no options I may have a piece of fish if I have to. I really don't want to there are some health reasons that it's not the best depending on where they get it but for the most part knowing I'm avoiding all that stuff.

And you're convinced that the nutrients you need are in the vegetables and fruits that you're eating? You're not losing out on one anything like iron or vitamin B.

No, there's a couple of very common debates that are out there and I'm by no means an expert I am really you know I'm not a nutritionist by trade and one of the things that I've sort of read online is if you said you went to medical school in the U.S. you're clearly not an expert because we just don't teach just enough and it's really come in the last few years that everyone's starting to educate our students about medical students specifically about this so definitely not a trained expert in this but yeah I'm definitely getting enough I do track with sort of a very free app that's really easy how much I'm getting a lot of stuff and periodic blood tests are confirming they're. The two big debates out there are the vitamin b12 which you definitely have to take a supplement. You can get limited amounts in some foods that are considered vegan. I'm not really after that. We have incredible b12 stores I will tell you so you don't have to start right away but it's a good idea there are some fortified plant-based milks that are out there that come with that so that's one that I definitely pay attention to and take a b12 supplement. The other one is the omega fatty acids which right now there's a lot of debate about that stuff. How it works and sort of the studies that I've read sort of point to you know more brain health with certain ones and they're not easy to get but if you pay attention you can some people I know do supplements but if you get flax seeds or it seems like that eat enough nuts and stuff you'll probably be okay with that.

Do you absorb certain nutrients the same way in like tofu or legumes as you would in steak?

The absorption it's that you know a lot to do with your overall state of health. I don't believe that I'm personally having any problems getting all this stuff. There's

not the bioavailability of most of this is pretty good you know I see some of the same deficiencies and plenty of my meat-eating patients for years and years tons of b12 deficiency tons of iron deficiency so yeah I think I get a pretty good amount of that stuff and are able to take it like everyone's an individual so you really it's something to talk the problem is which is why I love SBH is that we're going all-in on not this but a Wellness Center across the street. I know we've had podcasts about that, is that it's hard to find physicians specifically that are trained in this you know to have to send someone to a dietician which is great because they are experts to get this kind of training is where we hope not to be. We want to be able to have all our physicians trained and that's part of the future of SBH.

Are there certain caveats? I've heard I've heard this term vegan junk food, are certain things you got to be aware?

If you look at a lot of the earlier studies a lot of the earliest studies will actually point you to the fact that vegans weren't living much longer having less degrees of anything because yes you can certainly eat non animal-based stuff and get plenty of junk so it's not that hard if you go after certain types of chocolate you can find all sorts of junk that's considered vegan is tons of sugar cereals that are all vegan friendly well that's not what it's about. That's why I'm really more promoting for myself a whole food plant-based lifestyle and I think there's plenty of people that agree with that that says you know if you avoid tons of processed sugar it's nothing, it's not rocket science here avoid the sugar avoid you know all the enriched things in terms of enriched-flour products and it's sort of stay to the outside of the supermarket you're gonna end up running into a fruit and vegetable and the whole food is really where it's at. Even the oils where there's a lot of controversy about that. I'm not gonna get into that but lets you take know I've tried to really cut back on all oils as much as possible because it's highly processed stuff. There's a lot of debate over some of that. It's kind of like I use the example of just sort of a juicer versus the fruit. Yes you are getting plenty of vitamins if you have orange juice, but if you eat the whole orange the fiber is proven be healthier so you know you're taking out all the good stuff so it's the same with some of those oils you know walnut oil and avocado oil you know I just had an avocado for lunch I'm quite sure that's healthier than avocado oil and far less expensive so I try and stay away it's not easy. I'd say it's much easier

now the big-box store is in terms of Walmart's and you know Whole Foods and all this stuff I have sort of bought in and I have a lot more supplies available in terms of these types of foods and snacks and stuff but you got to pay attention you know like there's a lot of the fast food chains are diving in but you got to be careful. There's a lot of stuff loaded with salt. They're not going to be good for our hypertensive patients. You have to really read the ingredients but it's a journey that you need to do on your own with guidance from a clinician if you don't know so what you want to do you don't have to go and say okay you know what I'm not gonna eat sugar ever again I think those drastic changes are really tough on people and they tend to relapse. It's you know the whole January 1st I'm gonna work out eight days a week and 27 hours a day you know and then they never go. Start slow if this is something you're interested with you how I did it I said you know what let's just try and add you know two more servings of vegetables a day and then the next week let's just add a couple more servings of fruit and before you know it you're well on your way I think that's a lot easier and wherever you want to be in the spectrum is wherever you need to be because I don't look at it as a diet. Soon as you look at as a diet the word it's restrictive and there is no restrictive I just want to eat healthy you know I turned 50 this year I wanna I want to eat healthy I want to do all those health indicators you know I'm constantly telling patients get your colonoscopy, get your flu shot, eat healthy, well at least I could back it up a little bit more that I'm really making a concentrated effort to eat better.

Do you long for a Burger King meatless whopper?

No you know I haven't gone in on that yet. I'm sure it's yummy. There's probably stuff that's making it pretty good, but like I said I never longed for burgers before I wasn't a fast-food guy so yeah that's just something that doesn't really cross my mind. Listen if people like it and it probably better than something else, another bad choice, once again it really depends on where the spectrum you want to be if someone is eating big on how the processed foods, you know hot dogs and all that stuff where a lot of places aren't even sure what's in there on a day after day basis you know going for that whopper might be better. Maybe there's some legumes in there that are good. So it really is the moderation is key and finding where you belong, where you feel comfortable.

I know you have a young family. Do you eat in solitaire at the dinner table or do eat with your family?

We eat together as much as possible. I'd say today's electronics and you know have really taken everyone away and you know got everyone involved in their own thing, but I'd say it's had a very positive impact on the family, just having the vegetables around I always tell a story where I was just preparing a salad the other day and it happens in at least a few times a week where I cut up a bunch of carrots, I go to answer a phone call, I turn around of my carrots are gone and I know the dog didn't get to it and I look around one of the three of them is sitting there chomping on my carrots and I said you know that's a success. They're very interested and like I said I just talked to them "Hey all daddy's doing is eating more fruits and vegetables." I can't keep enough fruit in the house for them anyway they were always good. Now we're just heading to vegetables into it and listen I took my son to a birthday party they had pizza and cake, I'm not gonna tell them not to participate. Let them find their own way, but let's add in you know the healthy stuff.

Is a vegan diet expensive?

You know it depends on how far into it you want to go and what your belief system is. It doesn't have to be. You can make a lot of easy choices. You go to vegetables. Obviously organic fresh vegetables are always gonna be more expensive than frozen. A lot of good studies that say the frozen vegetables have lots of nutrients in them anyway. If you go to Whole Foods probably not. You know it's those fancy snacks that are gonna get ya, so while example beans you know if you want to buy, I love garbanzo beans or chickpeas, any of those beans you want to make them yourself are way cheaper than buying in a can which is even cheap, so I mean there's a real lot of ways when you take something for like 30 cents a pound down to like five cents a pound by doing it on your own. I've been quite impressed with I'm like "Wow this is not as bad," and I think it's just the competition's out there you look at the meatless companies browning up everywhere and that actually foster's some competition so it can be at first if your diet's fast food so you know for our population I'm very conscious to talk about "Hey you know I know that some of that aspect could be more expensive but if you pay attention you can actually do some good things.

In terms of eating healthier on a budget.”

Well that's good to know because I know they always refer to the Bronx as a food desert and they say well it's cheapest to eat fast food and so you know it's like catch-22 people are not eating healthy because they feel they can't afford to eat healthy.

It's a huge problem but I'd say you know here at SBH so we're taking an on call for us we have our Green Market that we have during the summer. We have the rooftop garden coming and I'll be tell you I'm pleasantly surprised to see that we're not the only ones. If you look a lot of the hospitals a lot of our colleagues are into this. I see it all over the city green markets are sprouting up. Obviously it's a challenge around here to really do it right, but I think physicians getting training in this are really gonna push it to the next level. We need the insurance companies to buy in. I think a lot of the social determinants of health are coming to the forefront and I see it being addressed a lot more, I mean in the past five years. The conversation is completely shifted. You look at the work with the healthy beverages at Dr. Salcedo at Union Community Health Center brought, sort of the no sugar zone, no sweetened beverage. This is just the next step. We need to just continue to promote healthy eating. There's tons of data to support it and we really need to make it available to our patients.

Okay Dr. Appelbaum, let me ask you two more quick questions. One, how do you feel?

I feel fantastic. I will say that I feel lots of energy. I'm very excited about the blood test results. I will tell you that's it that's a good thing to see you know it's surprising how well and how much not I didn't have that much room to improve but it really was pretty remarkable and yeah a lot of energy and you feel good about doing it. I wasn't I'll be honest with you for folks that already cook and already do that it's a little easier change. For me doing you know me making a big healthy salad is like a miracle. You know I never really did that so it might not be as exciting to other folks but part of it is I made that sauce and that's a healthy sauce. You have to be very careful I'd say with the information you get from you know the world of the internet. You know I tend to gravitate to the folks

that are science-based and then when you go to the to sort of the recipes people that don't seem to have an agenda I'd be honest I have personally not come across a lot of vegan agenda out there, I'm looking you know for people who say hey here's a recipe, a recipe is a recipe. They're just promoting eating well so those are the folks that I sort of go after and sort of learn from, so yes I've been feeling great.

Last question is there anybody that you see eating something in the next office in a restaurant and the cafeteria you go "boy I could go for one of those?"

No it really doesn't happen at be honest. You know I was at a family Super Bowl party and I just I'm not really triggered by that you know I definitely never felt great eating that stuff so I definitely have the experience of growing up and it's been for a while that that sort of been out of my mindset where I know how food can make you feel when you do it right and that is sort of burned in my brain so to speak. I guess the only way to explain it so I'm not a big, craving person and that's definitely there's a bit of luck in there, so I don't want to say that hell you know it's easy. I know it's hard I've seen people, patients, family struggle with weight and you know food means different things to different people. It's a lot different than something like alcohol. You know you could easily have your house I have no alcohol in it. You could very easily not go to a bar even those folks who struggle with alcoholism go to parties where it's at and you can't say never go to a party again. How you gonna stay away from food? It's almost impossible you know. You got to open your fridge read you have to eat every day so I see that as you have to be realistic so when you talk to patients and that's what I do you really need to have that mindset and understand. You know smoking I think is getting slightly easier because there's not a tremendous peer pressure anymore to do that. But still cigarettes are everywhere and you know if you're gonna walk down the street in New York and say just avoid those folk so you're gonna be dodging a lot of that, but when it comes to healthy eating it's the same thing. Cravings are real for a lot of people. You know the sugar getting rid all that stuff but I think in the end when you realize how you feel and you see your blood test there's nothing better than watching folks who they'll tell me that you know I lost this much weight, you see that and not on a vegan diet on any diet when they're when they're getting healthy that excitement this is just another way to do that when someone comes and say hey I started exercising and it's working your

heart's really healthy that's great. This is another thing that people can do to really enhance their health.

Now again at that Super Bowl party you went to you innately went for the carrots someone else may go for the sliders or something, is that okay? I mean is it okay to if you're changing your diet to sort of fall off the wagon?

Yeah it's an individual journey, right? It really is how you feel and you know there's some strategies that the dietitians have always taught us, you know write things down I said that to me was eye-opening writing down what you eat. I told patients to do that and I said oh geez I just write it down I'm like oh my god it's not easy. I said the app which is I found a very easy free one that I mean if you have any basic smartphone that has a camera you can scan things and it's really what's the app. The name of the app is chronometer and it's free there's occasionally an ad on there but other than that it's a really easy and it tracks every one of your, how much fiber, protein, you know all the different nutrients and you can see what your weight is. You can do a whole lot of stuff with it and I'm not doing it to count calories I'm doing it for the most part just to see the vitamin levels and it has almost every single food in there that you can ever imagine and if you find a food that's not in there they say we don't recognize this and they ask you to take a picture of the nutrients blurb on the side and the front of the cover and they'll call you and say hey thanks to you we added this to our library and we found it which is always a sort of a thrill to see that you added something. Yeah, writing down anything like that is great. It's not unlike when I tell people "Please write down your blood pressure, please write down your blood sugar in the morning." You know that the famous you know blood sugar log is eye-opening you know so and it has obviously other implications. Getting the discipline to do that is not easy because it's every single thing you put in your you know in your mouth and it's your way you're gonna miss it but yeah that's been great.

Well Dr. Applebaum thank you very much for joining us for a few minutes today on SBH Bronx Health Talk. For more information on services available at SBH Health System visit www.sbhny.org. Until next time.