



Beyond the Label: A Dietitian's Guide to Plant-Based Meat Alternatives



INTRODUCTION

Plant-based meat alternatives are a fast-growing segment in today's food environment — yet for many consumers, questions remain about their nutritional profile and the role they play in a balanced diet.¹ As trusted nutrition experts, registered dietitians are uniquely positioned to guide individuals through the noise with evidence-based insights.



This toolkit is designed to support you in those conversations. Drawing from the latest research, it highlights how plant-based meat alternatives can fit into a plant-forward eating pattern, helping diversify protein sources while maintaining balance, taste, and satisfaction. Inside, you'll find science-backed guidance, practical tips, and conversation starters to help you translate complex data into clear, actionable advice.

Whether you're working with clients or speaking to consumers who are curious about trying these products, seeking to diversify their protein intake, or aiming to align their eating habits with health goals, this resource is for you. Designed to help build your confidence in making your evidence-based recommendations, this toolkit is intended to offer what you need.

Together, we can help consumers make informed choices that embrace plant-forward meals while keeping convenience top of mind.

At-A-Glance:

What are Plant-Based Meat Alternatives (PBMA)?	4
Nutrient Profile of Plant-Based Meat Alternatives	6
What Does Science Say?	8
Practical Guidance on PBMA for Dietitians	10
References	15
Consumer Handout	16
Resources	16

WHAT ARE PLANT-BASED MEAT ALTERNATIVES?

The new generation of plant-based meat alternatives (PBMA) are plant-derived products formulated to replicate the taste, texture, and overall eating experience of animal-based proteins. PBMA support dietary shifts toward plant-forward eating patterns, aligning with both health and environmental reasons.² In fact, with the growing market category of PBMA and increasing consumer acceptance, they present a valid opportunity to increase the dietary plant-to-animal protein ratio from about 1:2 to 1:1.^{2,3}

The Rise of PBMA:

As the PBMA market grows worldwide, sustainability continues to stand out as an important priority. In the U.S., people are turning to PBMA not just for sustainability but also because they deliver on healthfulness, high-quality protein, and taste—factors that are driving even stronger momentum.^{1,5} A growing interest in PBMA among vegetarians, flexitarians, and others choosing to add more plant-based protein to their diets is a driving force behind the innovation taking place in this segment of the market.

What Kinds of PBMA are Available?

The PBMA category has grown exponentially over the last decade, with plant-based products available as patties, crumbles, links, strips, nuggets, and sticks created to imitate beef, poultry, pork, and fish products. This list isn't exhaustive—more are popping up every month. But the best part? Unlike earlier meat substitutes, recent innovations in this product category allow items to more closely replicate the eating experience and the nutritional profile of the meat product they are meant to mimic.^{2,3}



Insight Spotlight:

PBMA do not have a regulated standard of identity.⁴ However, the term is widely used in both research and by consumers to describe plant-based products that mimic the taste and texture of meat, making it a useful and consistent way to discuss this category.

WHAT ARE PLANT-BASED MEAT ALTERNATIVES MADE OF?

Ingredient Overview

PBMA are made using ingredients like soy, pea, and wheat in concentrated forms.^{2,3,6} By using protein isolates and concentrates from these foods, food scientists can create PBMA that contain similar protein amounts as their animal counterparts. **However, not all PBMA are created equally — the composition of products varies based on the ingredients used for protein and fat, in addition to the fortification the product receives.**² Some PBMA also offer dietary fiber (a nutrient most Americans aren't getting enough of), as well as less saturated fat than similar animal protein-based products.^{2,7}

Plant Protein Sources:

Legumes such as soybeans, peas, chickpeas, lentils, and beans, along with whole grains like wheat, corn, oats, quinoa, amaranth, and buckwheat, are commonly found in PBMA to help provide protein and amino acids, helping to pack a powerful nutritional punch.⁶ During the formulation of PBMA, concentrated protein sources are often used. As a result, some naturally occurring nutrients, such as fiber and certain micronutrients, may be reduced. Fortification is therefore used to restore and enhance the product's nutritional profile.

Quality Enhancers:

Think of these ingredients as those needed to help ensure the product can maintain its convenience, versatility, and customer approval. This includes ingredients used to keep the color fresh and bold, like natural dyes from cumin, carotene, lycopene, and beetroot juice, as well as structural ingredients used to help bind and shape the products, like carrageenan, starch, and cellulose.⁶

Nutrient Boosters:

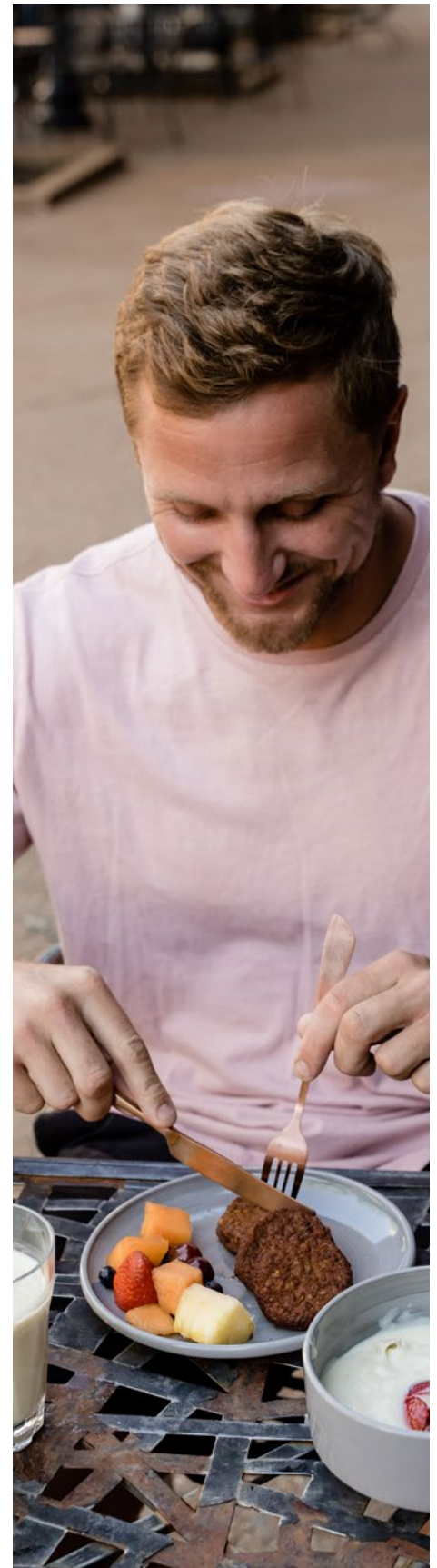
PBMA can be fortified with vitamins and minerals. Micronutrients such as iron, vitamin B12, and zinc are added to boost nutrition and support nutrient shortfalls.^{3,6}

The Richness Factor:

Dietary fats, like plant-based oils such as sunflower, rapeseed, soybean, and coconut, can be used to help create a consumer-friendly mouthfeel, taste, and texture.⁶ Other ingredients are used to add the depth of flavor that ignites that familiar taste profile. This includes ingredients like spices, herbs, yeast extracts, paprika, sugar, and mushrooms.⁶

Innovation in Food Tech:

New PBMA innovations have enlisted the help of precision fermentation technology.¹ This is a fancy way of saying that food scientists can use microorganisms to make proteins that mimic the functional and sensory quality of animal proteins.¹











Note: This is a new development, so if someone has tried an older PBMA and written them off because they didn't like the taste, encourage them to try them again. Plus, with new flavor combinations, you may be amazed at how far PBMA have come!

Nutrient Profile Of PLANT-BASED MEAT ALTERNATIVES

The nutrient composition of PBMA has changed over the years. You may have even noticed the rebranding of household PBMA brands as manufacturers have innovated product lines to “put the plant back in plant-based foods.” While a brilliant marketing tactic, it has also equated to an upgrade to their nutrition profile. Many PBMA now have more fiber, less saturated fat, and more flavor — a win-win for the consumer.² Let’s take a closer look at how nutrients in PBMA stack up with similar animal-based prepared food counterparts.

Nutrient Comparison Chart⁸

Item	Weight (g)	Calories	Total Fat (g)	Saturated Fat (g)	Sodium (mg)	Total Carb (g)	Fiber (g)	Protein (g)	Iron (mg)	
PBMA Burger*		115	240	15	6.5	420	9	4	20	3.4
Processed Beef Burger Patty*		133	320	25	9.5	90	0	22	2.7	
PBMA Breaded Chicken Tenders*		85	220	13	2.5	560	16	3	10	1.7
Breaded Chicken Tenders*		211	470	6	1.0	430	14	1	11	0.73
PBMA Hot Dog*		49	100	6	0.5	420	4	0	7	1.12
All-Beef Processed Hot Dog*		60	170	15	7.0	620	1	0	7	0.6
PBMA Sausage*		88	200	13	1.0	470	7	3.0	15	2.47
Italian Pork Sausage*		72	250	21	7	490	2	0	13	0.72

*: Values for each are a composite of different brands.⁹

Insight Spotlight: Nutrient Fortification

While catchy headlines may have you wondering if PBMA can deliver similar nutrient density, the data here show they can. Many brands are fortified with shortfall nutrients, like iron, zinc, and vitamin B12 to more closely resemble the nutrition profile of animal proteins.³

Note: some nutrients will not be shown in the USDA nutrition facts panel since these aren't required to be displayed; instead, you will need to consult the brand's webpage directly.



QUICK TIP:

PBMA vary widely in their ingredients, with some offering more of a specific nutrient than others.^{2,3} Keep this in mind as you make PBMA recommendations to your clients to find the brands that work best for their personal nutrition needs.



Nutrient Spotlight: Iron

Almost all PBMA provide the same amount of, if not more, iron than their animal protein counterparts in the products compared above.

Protein Quality:

Proteins are made up of 20 amino acids, some indispensable (essential) and others dispensable (nonessential).¹² Foods higher in indispensable amino acids rank higher in protein quality. This is measured using the Protein Digestibility Corrected Amino Acid Score (PDCAAS), where 1.0 is the highest value.¹² Animal proteins like beef, eggs, and milk typically score 1.0, meaning they provide all essential amino acids and are considered a complete protein.¹² Soy protein also scores 1.0, while other plant-protein sources used in PBMA, such as wheat (~0.5) and lentils (~0.8), still contribute valuable amino acids.¹² When eaten as part of a varied, balanced diet, these plant proteins can collectively meet amino acid needs throughout the day.¹²

Fat Source:

1 tablespoon of soybean oil = 2 grams of saturated fat; 1 tablespoon coconut oil = 11 grams of saturated fat.^{9,10} Paying attention to the type of fat in the PBMA you choose is important, especially if you have a history of cardiovascular disease.¹¹



WHAT DOES SCIENCE SAY?

The great news about PBMA is that research continues to evolve, exploring the role PBMA can play in a healthy, balanced diet as well as in disease prevention and treatment.^{2,3} However, some of the nuances in how PBMA are produced have created confusion about their healthfulness in the diet. Let's take a closer look at the science to help you sift through those headlines with confidence (and an understanding of the evidence) at the forefront.

Plant-Based Meat Alternatives & Ultra-Processed Foods

Based on one of the more recognized food classification systems called Nova, PBMA are considered ultra-processed foods.^{3,13} Unfortunately, this classification creates a misconception in the public eye despite research that shows their healthfulness in a balanced diet.¹² The issue: the processing involved in the ingredients they contain, such as concentrated sources of plant-based proteins and emulsifiers used for structure.^{3,13} If nutrient density is considered at the forefront over the degree of processing, PBMA can help fill nutrient gaps, decrease saturated fat intakes, and encourage the switch toward a more plant-based diet.^{2,3,13,14}

The bottom line: nutrient content should be the key driver of healthfulness, not the level of processing.^{3,13}

Plant-Based Alternatives and Cardiometabolic Health

Embracing a plant-based diet typically results in cardiometabolic benefits. While these modern versions of PBMA have only recently been the focus of research, the available evidence shows that in many respects the processing involved in their manufacture does not diminish their nutritional and health attributes. For example, a recent analysis published in the journal *Lancet* revealed that although total ultra-processed food intake was associated with a higher incidence of type 2 diabetes, the intake of plant-based alternatives were inversely associated to risk.²² In agreement are the results of a randomized controlled trial conducted by Stanford University researchers, which found that in comparison to their animal-based counterparts, the consumption of PBMA improved markers of cardiovascular disease in generally healthy adults, such as decreasing LDL-cholesterol and TMAO (a possible predictor of heart disease).^{15,16} There is even evidence that PBMA may slow the aging process.¹⁷ In an analysis of a large British population study, intake of ultra-processed vegetarian alternatives, which included plant-based burgers and sausages, was associated with a longer telomere length, whereas the consumption of ultra-processed animal products was associated with a shorter telomere length.¹⁷ Telomeres, which are present at the end of chromosomes, shorten as we age.¹⁷

The bottom line: dietary fiber in plant-based diets offers tremendous health benefits for weight management.²⁰ Consider PBMA with a higher fiber content to support daily fiber goals.



Plant-Based Diets and Weight Control

Shifting toward embracing a plant-based diet may also support weight control for many individuals.¹⁸ In fact, after reviewing seven studies, scientists found that when participants followed a predominantly plant-based diet, greater weight loss was seen.¹⁸ Why is this the case? Plant-proteins, dietary fiber, and the reduced calorie density are prime contributors.^{18,19} Plus, plant-based diets also improved gut microbiota symbiosis, thanks in large part to their dietary fiber component, which helps promote the health of the good gut bugs that aid in weight control.^{19,20} It's important to note that most research has examined overall plant-based dietary patterns, rather than the specific role of PBMA in weight management. Because the nutrient and fiber content of PBMA can vary, patients and clients should be encouraged to consume a diverse array of plant foods to support overall dietary benefits.

The bottom line: PBMA may be considered ultra-processed by Nova, but their nutrient profile may support cardiometabolic health long term when consumed as part of a balanced diet.¹⁵⁻¹⁷



Practical Guidance for Dietitians

HOW TO TALK TO CONSUMERS & CLIENTS ABOUT PLANT-BASED MEAT ALTERNATIVES

Talking about PBMA can be challenging, especially depending on which media headline or social media claim they may have seen most recently. Thankfully, patients, clients, and followers are turning to you for sound advice – that’s a victory! As you begin these conversations, it’s important to keep in mind the facts that we know about PBMA. Refer to the resources tab for a downloadable handout that translates the section below into a consumer-friendly version you can share with your clients.

Intake Recommendations:

Research shows a daily serving of PBMA fits in a healthy diet.³

Note, this is individualized, and since nutrition varies widely in PBMA products, recommendations should be based on your client’s needs.^{2,3} Consider overall food intakes for the day and recommend including PBMA alongside other whole foods such as fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and lean protein sources (plant or animal).

You’ve Been Asked, We’re Helping You Answer:

1 Are plant-based meat alternatives healthier than regular meat?

Both PBMA and animal meats can be included as part of a healthy, balanced diet.^{2,3} Incorporating PBMA helps gradually shift consumers’ dietary choices to incorporate more plant protein into their meals in a convenient, easy-to-use way.³ Plus, PBMA may help increase dietary fiber and decrease saturated fat intake in the standard American diet.³

2 Are plant-based meat alternatives considered sustainable?

Yes, PBMA support dietary shifts toward embracing plant-forward diets aligned with environmental reasons.^{2,3,13} In developed countries, two-thirds of protein intake comes from animal sources.³ Encouraging a shift to plant proteins in a similar form, like PBMA, is a more practical and achievable goal for high-income countries to balance protein intakes equally among plant and animal sources.³

3 Are they ultra-processed, and should I be worried about that?

According to the Nova classification system, PBMA are classified as ultra-processed.^{3,12} However, this classification is solely based on the degree of processing, not the nutrient density of the food. Studies have shown that the nutrient density of PBMA can support not only a healthy lifestyle but may also improve cardiometabolic health and support weight control.^{3,13-20}

4 Do plant-based meats provide enough protein and iron compared to animal sources?

Nutrient fortification allows PBMA to deliver protein and iron content similar to animal sources.^{2,3,13} Individual brands vary; it’s best to take a closer look at the nutrition facts panel to ensure the product you’re selecting meets the nutrient targets you’re recommending, especially considering other nutrients, like saturated fat and sodium.^{2,3}

5 Is there any benefit to choosing PBMA over other plant proteins, like tofu, beans, or lentils?

Convenience and time are two reasons consumers typically opt for PBMA over other plant proteins that may require a little more prep work in the kitchen. The fact that many of these products require just a simple reheat and can easily be prepared with a quick side comes in handy for busy families who are trying to quickly get a meal put together. Nutritionally speaking, PBMA don’t retain the same amount of fiber, resistant starch, or bioactives (like polyphenols) that whole, legume-based plant proteins provide.² That’s where nutrient fortification comes in to elevate the nutrient density of PBMA products. With this in mind, encouraging clients to include both forms of plant-based proteins in their diet is key to increasing variety and moving the needle towards consuming a plant-based diet routinely.

Meal Planning with Plant-Based Meat Alternatives

PBMA makes navigating mealtime a breeze. Delicious, nutritious, and convenient, the wide variety of options allows individuals to customize their menu, utilizing the PBMA that works for them and their needs. Plus, their versatility is expanding palates as consumers around the globe explore how to add them to their weekly rotations.

Consider these tips to help inspire your followers and clients alike to incorporate PBMA in their meal plan this week.

Today's MENU

Morning Favorites Made Easy:

Make-Ahead Breakfast Sandwiches

Layer plant-based sausage or bacon, an egg, and cheese on an English muffin. Wrap and refrigerate until ready to eat. Reheat in the microwave for a grab-and-go meal.

Savory Veggie Muffin Cups

Mix chopped plant-based sausage with veggies, eggs, chopped bell peppers and onions, and fresh herbs. Bake in muffin tins for portable eggless "frittatas" (that can also easily be tossed between a whole-grain English muffin for a quick sandwich).

Breakfast Hash

Dice sweet potatoes and sauté with onions, peppers, and plant-based chorizo for a nutrient-rich skillet meal that can be wrapped in a tortilla if you're on the run.

Veggie Sausage & Avocado Toast

Pop a plant-based sausage patty in the microwave. Serve open-faced on a thick slice of whole-grain toast with smashed avocado, tomatoes, and a drizzle of hot sauce.

Try the
SOY SPECIALS!

Main Meals In No Time:

Street-Style Tacos

Sauté plant-based chorizo with onions and peppers, then serve in a tortilla with salsa, shredded cabbage or lettuce, and cilantro on top. Drizzle with hot sauce.

Sloppy-Joe Sandwich

Heat a PBMA, like a ground crumble, with BBQ sauce. Layer between a whole-grain bun and serve with a side salad, like coleslaw.

Mediterranean Grain Bowl

Start with a base of quinoa (or an alternative cooked whole grain of choice). Top with a variety of veggies, like tomatoes, cucumbers, olives, and spinach. Add a few ounces of plant-based chicken strips on top. Drizzle with a Greek dressing.

Veggie & Beef Ramen Salad

Start with a base of ramen noodles then add shredded carrots, cabbage, bell peppers, and edamame. Add a PBMA like chicken or beef, then drizzle with teriyaki sauce or sesame dressing.

One-Pan Jambalaya

Combine brown rice, diced tomatoes, celery, onion, peppers, and plant-based sausage in a pot with vegetable broth and preferred seasonings. Simmer until the grains are tender.

Shepherd's Pie with Lentils & Plant-Based Crumbles

Mix cooked lentils, carrots, peas, and plant-based ground meat with a mushroom soup (vegan soup options are available here, too). Top with mashed potatoes, preferred cheese, and bake until the internal temperature reaches 165 degrees F.

Common Skeptics of PLANT-BASED MEAT ALTERNATIVES



The Label Detective

If they can't pronounce it, that doesn't mean they shouldn't eat it. In fact, many derivatives of fruits and vegetables are used to help provide taste, texture, and convenience that consumers have come to love in PBMA. For example, explain that mixed tocopherols are a form of vitamin E that function as antioxidants to help maintain the freshness of many PBMA products.²¹



The Meat Lover

There's a place for both animal and plant proteins at the table. Recommend clients start with a 50-50 split, utilizing plant-based ground crumble with ground beef in a taco recipe. Encourage them to dress up those tacos just as they would if it were just beef. Small inclusions/modifications add up.



The Picky Eater

PBMA comes in kid-friendly dinosaur shapes and nuggets; they can invite kids to the table while unleashing the inner child in everyone. Recommend clients pair with a favorite fruit and veggie for a complete meal.



The Budget Balancer

Rising food costs make it more important than ever to be mindful of costs at the market. But remind clients not to let the sticker shock deter them from PBMA. Being mindful of weekly sales, pairing PBMA with grains and veggies to stretch meals, and utilizing them a few times a week is a great way to encourage a budget-friendly swap to more plant protein.

How to Talk to the Media & On Social Media About Plant-Based Meat Alternatives

Rooted in facts, these science-backed talking points are perfect to help spread the word in media outlets and/or on your preferred social network. Tweak these and make them your own the next time an outlet calls on you.



Sample Quotes for Media Interviews:

Eating plant-based has never been more inviting! From plant-based burgers and links, to ground crumbles and fish alternatives, **there's a plant-based meat option for everyone.** And — you don't have to be vegan to enjoy these products. In fact, using meat alternatives a few times a week is an easy way to bring more plants (and variety) to the plate while still delivering quality nutrition.^{2,3} As a dietitian who's married to a man who grew up on a cattle farm, there's always room to win them over! Swapping our burger night with a plant-based alternative has become a requested weekly staple in our menu rotation — one where I find my better half tossing some jalapenos, cheddar cheese, and fresh cut lettuce and tomato on his plant-based burger. Remember, **there's a place for both plant and animal foods in a healthy eating pattern.**^{2,3}

It's time to flip the narrative surrounding "ultra-processed" foods — especially when it comes to those that offer vitamins, minerals, and other important nutrients. **Looking beyond the processing and evaluating the nutrient value of a food tells a very different story when it comes to the healthfulness of that food.**^{2,3,13,14} For instance, many plant-based meats are often fortified with specific nutrients, like iron and B12, and can provide protein levels similar to their animal protein counterparts.^{2,3,13,14} When you pair them with veggies and whole grains, plant-based meats can be part of a balanced plate, too. **Look beyond the flashy headlines and check out the Nutrition Facts label for protein, sodium, and saturated fat on your favorite plant-based products.** Then choose the brand that aligns best with your health goals.

Opting for a plant-based protein is a great way to support dietary shifts toward embracing plant-forward diets — a strategy aligned with global environmental reasons.^{2,3,13} In developed countries, over two-thirds of protein intake come from animal sources.³ **Encouraging small changes that add more plant protein to the plate is an easy solution, especially when they come in products similar to their animal counterparts, like convenient plant-based meat products.** These options offer an achievable and realistic way to help busy people balance protein intake equally among plant and animal sources.³

Plant-based meat alternatives are popular because they're quick and easy. Most just need a quick reheat, which is a win for busy families. They don't naturally have all the fiber and plant compounds you'd get from beans or lentils, but many are fortified to enhance nutrients (like iron and B12).² As a dietitian, I encourage people to enjoy both: **keep PBMA on hand for convenience, and mix in whole plant proteins for fiber, variety, and balance.**



Social Media Suggestions

Show your followers how PBMA can fit into a balanced diet. Consider these ideas to get your creative juices flowing. These can easily be tailored toward your preferred social media platform(s):

1 Play on Viral Trends

Create a fun twist on FoodTok trends, such as the dino chicken nugget with mashed potato volcano. Swap those dino nuggets with a plant-based alternative and highlight the nutrition they provide — especially in comparison to their animal counterparts. For busy moms, this hits home showing them that they can add more plant foods into their child’s diet without sacrificing nutrition.

2 Conduct a Plant-Based Taste Test Reaction

Create a short video filming a friend or relative trying PBMA for the first time. You can add in a blindfold for dramatic effect and include elements like signs and voiceover answering questions that highlight the nutrient composition of PBMA .

3 Swap in Seconds

Create a timelapse video showing how a traditional animal protein meal can be swapped with a PBMA version in no time. Recipes like spaghetti Bolognese or ground taco crumble work really well in this format with your preferred plant-based meat alternative. Post the nutrition facts to bring home the fact that PBMA offer a variety of important nutrients.

4 No time, No Problem

Create a carousel-style post with still images showing you making a quick no-recipe meal using a plant-based meat alternative. Toss freezer stir-fry veggies and edamame in a pan with a plant-based chicken-style option, then heat a 90-second grain. Emphasize that convenience wins when time is tight. Add text overlays to highlight nutrition points and budget-friendly options (like boosting protein and fiber with frozen edamame). Finish with the full nutrition breakdown and—if available—the total cost.

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Patient Handout

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