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Fall 2009



Inquiring omnivores want to know, “What’s a vegetarian?”

Value in Vegetarianism

By Suzanne Dixon MPH, MS, RD

Omnivores – people who eat all foods, from meat and dairy, to poultry, pork, fish, eggs, vegetables, fruit, nuts, seeds, grains, and more – often are curious about vegetarianism. They may have heard a vegetarian diet is a healthy option, both personally and environmentally. They may want to incorporate more vegetarian foods into their diet, but don’t know where to start. Whatever the reason, a little information can help demystify vegetarianism.

What’s in a Name?

Vegetarian is a catch-all term that encompasses different diets and styles of eating. It may include people who eat no animal products whatsoever or people who eat no meat, but do enjoy dairy and eggs. Some who consider themselves vegetarians even eat fish from time to time. The word “vegetarian” doesn’t give us the fine details, so here’s a run-down of some of the vegetarian diets you may encounter:

- Lacto-ovo vegetarian – a person who eats plant foods, eggs, and dairy, but no meat, poultry, seafood, fish, pork, or other animal foods
- Vegan – a person who eats only plant foods; vegans eat no animal foods at all – no honey, dairy, eggs, fish, poultry, pork, or meat.
- Lacto-ovo pescatarian – a person who eats plant foods, eggs, dairy, and fish, but no meat, poultry, pork, or other animal foods.
- Semi-vegetarian – sometimes referred to as a “flexitarian”, a semi-vegetarian is a person who eats a vegetarian diet much of the time, but will include animal foods in the diet when convenient or because he/she enjoys these foods occasionally.
- Fruitarian – a person who eats a diet comprised only of fruit, nuts, and other self-reproducing plants that are not destroyed in the process of being eaten; for example, when we eat a carrot, we eat the whole plant and the carrot cannot reproduce itself, but when we eat an apple, the apple tree continues to live and produce more fruit.
- Raw Foodist – a person who eats only food that is not heated above a temperature of approximately 115° Fahrenheit, roughly the temperature of hot (not scalding) tap water, and the temperature at which raw foodists

believe that enzymes and other vital components of plant food are destroyed by heat; raw foodists may be vegan as well.

By the Numbers

According to a 2008 survey conducted by Vegetarian Times, a consumer publication devoted to all things vegetarian and vegan, about 3.2% of American adults, roughly 7.3 million people, report following a vegetarian diet. About 0.5% of the adult population, around 1 million, follow a vegan diet. The numbers of people following other vegetarian diets such as fruitarians and raw foodists are tough to pin down, but likely make up only a tiny fraction of all vegetarians.

Approximately 23 million people, or 10% of adults follow a “vegetarian-inclined” diet. This last group is what many refer to as flexitarians or semi-vegetarians. Also of interest are trends in flexitarian eating. The number of flexitarians in the U.S. is likely to increase in the coming years, as the Vegetarian Times survey bears out: 5.2% of adults, nearly 12 million people, indicated that they are interested in eating a “vegetarian-based” diet at some time in the future. These are the flexitarians of tomorrow.

Common sentiments among people self-identifying as flexitarian include, “I don’t really like meat,” “I don’t really eat much meat,” and “I eat some chicken once in a while.” The flexitarian approach is appealing because it is a practical, health-conscious, and eco-conscious way to eat. It acknowledges that for some, completely giving up meat may be impractical, but that by focusing on eating a mostly plant food diet, both personal and planetary health can be improved.

Pros and Cons of Vegetarian Diets

The Pros

The reasons for following a vegetarian diet are as varied as vegetarian diets themselves. People cite overall health, concern about the environment, desire for more natural approaches to wellness, food safety, animal welfare, religion, and weight loss and maintenance as common reasons for following a vegetarian diet.

Many of these reasons do hold up to scrutiny. Numerous studies indicate that vegetarians have less cancer, heart disease, diabetes, and other chronic diseases as compared with omnivores (non-vegetarians). This suggests vegetarians are healthier and enjoy better overall wellness than omnivores. Vegetarians appear less likely to suffer from overweight and obesity than omnivores, giving

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“weight” to the idea that vegetarianism keeps people slim.

Environmentally, animal food production is costly. Public health expert Dr. Barry Popkin notes that livestock production accounts for 55% of erosion, 37% of pesticide use, 50% of antibiotics use, and a third of damaging nitrogen and phosphorus discharges to surface water in the U.S. Further, 18% of greenhouse gas emissions are due to livestock, and animal food production requires 2 to 5 times the water necessary to produce plant crops of similar caloric value. Clearly, raising animals for food costs the environment a lot.

Better health, less use of precious resources, staying slim... what's not to like? Vegetarian diets have a lot to offer.

The Cons

A well-balanced vegetarian diet has few drawbacks. However, if you plan to go vegetarian, you'll want to avoid a few common pitfalls, many of which are an issue more commonly for vegans – people eating no animal foods at all.

A few key nutrients are impossible to get from a vegan diet, including vitamin D and vitamin B12. A few additional nutrients, including zinc, calcium, iron, and omega-3 fatty acids can be challenging, but not impossible, to find in a vegan diet.

Including vitamin D and vitamin B12 dietary supplements is essential for vegans. While sun exposure can allow the body to produce vitamin D, it's important to note that for much of the U.S., the sun isn't strong enough to spur vitamin D production in the fall, winter, and early spring months.

Omega-3 fatty acids can be found in flaxseeds, nuts, and other seeds, while green leafy vegetables and fortified cereals and beverages can supply plenty of calcium. Enriched grains, such as cereals and rice; soybeans and soy products, such as tofu, edamame (boiled or steamed soy beans) and soymilk; and molasses can supply iron to a vegan diet. You'll find zinc in grains, beans, soybeans, nuts, and seeds.

Avoiding Junk Food Vegetarianism

Another possible drawback of following a vegetarian diet is not unlike a problem commonly seen in the general population: Too much junk food. Simply because a food is vegetarian does not mean it's healthy. After all, a person can eat donuts, bagels, potato chips, candy, and French fries and be a vegetarian, but obviously, this is not a healthy diet.

The best way to make sure you get all the nutrition you need on a vegetarian diet is to “eat simple foods”. The less processing a food has undergone, the more nutritious it is for us. Processing strips away many of the essential nutrients found in food naturally, so your best bet is to

base your diet around foods that look as close to how they appeared when they came off the tree, out of the grown, or off the vine. Choose corn on the cob instead of corn chips; try apples instead of apple muffins; and enjoy whole grain bread instead of white bread.

Simple Steps to Going Veggie

If you're intrigued by vegetarianism, but don't know where to start, a few simple hints and tips will get you on your way:

- No combining needed: You don't need to “combine” foods such as grains and beans at every meal to get “complete” protein. Eat plenty of beans, nuts, seeds, whole grains, and vegetables, on a regular basis, and you're covered.
- Super soy: Soybean and soy foods, including tofu, offer all of the amino acids – the building blocks of protein – that are needed for good health.
- Start slow: by introducing one vegetarian meal per week to your personal menu or to your family. For example, make Wednesdays “veggie night” for dinner.
- Travel the globe: Indian, Thai, Chinese, Mexican, Vietnamese, and other ethnic foods have many vegetarian options naturally. Be adventurous and try recipes from other cultures to “stretch” yourself in terms of flavor and cooking without meat from time to time.

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