

VEGETARIAN – IS IT HEALTHY?

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The term “vegetarian” may include a number of different nutritional pathways. If a person eats eggs but not cheese, he is ovo-vegetarian. A lacto-vegetarian eats dairy products, and a semi-vegetarian may eat some chicken or fish as well as dairy products and eggs. All of these diets are usually lower than the Standard American Diet (SAD) in total protein, saturated fat, and cholesterol. They include more fruits, vegetables and usually more grains. Depending on how well one is able to plan their diet on a daily basis, vegetarians can be either healthier or unhealthier than the average person who follows the SAD diet. Vegetarians need to consider the make-up of their diet, including protein, carbohydrates, and fat. If you don’t eat animal products of any sort, you should understand where essential amino acids come from so that your body will be able to make the complete proteins needed for its growth and maintenance. Grains, nuts, seeds, beans, vegetables, and legumes contain some essential and some nonessential amino acids, but with the exception of the soybean none are complete proteins. You should eat at least some complete protein as well as essential amino acids (not produced in your own body) which form the structure of your body’s muscle, bone matrix, enzymes, body organs, and other important components.

Although protein from soy products are complete proteins, they do have some anti-nutrient components in that they interfere with absorption of vitamins and minerals from the GI tract to some extent. Food combinations such as brown rice and peas or corn and beans, along with some soy protein, can furnish adequate protein. In an 1800 cal/day diet, the ideal protein intake should approximate 600 calories, or 150 grams of protein. Vegetarians may also be at risk of iron deficiency because the sources of iron are red meat, liver, and egg yolk, but small amounts can be obtained also from dried beans, spinach, brewers yeast, and even dried fruits. Vitamin B12 deficiency is a common problem with vegetarians because even if a person eats fortified cereals or B12 supplements, the B12 may be destroyed by the stomach acid and not be absorbed in its usable form. Vitamin B12 in the body usually is derived from red meat, which has “extrinsic factor” which combines with your own stomach “intrinsic factor” to create the usable vitamin B12 in your body. Therefore, in vegetarians injections of vitamin B12 or sublingual B12 pills are the best source for that vitamin. Vitamin D may need to be supplemented if a person does not get much sunlight, and this is true for everyone. Total body sun for about 20 minutes 3 times a week furnishes all the vitamin D3 that your body needs. In our area’s climate in the wintertime, people are exposed to very little sunlight so they should take at least 400U each day. Zinc and calcium are also elements that vegetarians need and come from spinach, kale, broccoli, and legumes which are usually in good supply in the vegetarian diet.

The reasons that people go on vegetarian diets are varied. I have spoken to a lot of vegetarians over the years and have found that some abhor the idea of killing animals or

fish and eating their meat. Some feel that you should not even partake of animal products such as eggs, milk, or honey. Others feel that this should be extended to their whole lifestyle and that the wearing of leather, wool, or even silk goes against their sympathy for treatment of any living creature. People who are meat-eaters do so for a variety of reasons as well. Some simply like the taste, others need the nutrient value because they work hard at manual labor, and others just grew up eating meat as part of their diet and will continue to eat it for the rest of their lives.

Vegetarians have increased intakes of fruits and vegetables; they have a good source of the phytochemicals and fiber which are necessary nutrients for the body. Many vegetarians often deny any use of alcohol, tobacco, and fried foods as part of their healthy lifestyle.

Many studies have been done to prove that one dietary preference is better than the other. Overall, many vegetarians have a lower risk of developing obesity, diabetes, high blood pressure, heart disease, and cancer than do meat-eaters. Meat-eaters can be healthy, but often eat about twice as much meat as they need to in this country. Small amounts of meat are easy for your body to digest and utilize, but excessive meat containing hormones and antibiotics are not healthy. A beginning vegetarian may be wise to read about this or even consult with a dietitian.

In today's times, it's pretty difficult to dine out and eat a good vegetarian diet. First of all, the waiters and restaurant owners would like for you to order a "complete meal." Ordering vegetables and grains or pasta simply doesn't bring the cost of the meal up enough to justify the preparation of it. Additionally, when dinner with meat is served, the portions are so large that there's enough for two with some left over for lunch the next day. However, the vegetarian controversy will rage as long as men can have individual food preferences. In the US there are approximately 9 million people who are identified as vegetarians, whereas another 40 million claim to have reduced meat intake because of their health.

The bottom line is that neither a high meat nor an extreme vegetarian diet is a very healthy choice. A vegetarian who eats eggs and dairy products can obtain good protein without difficulty. Extrinsic sources of vitamin B12 by supplementation should be standard in the diet of anyone who does not eat red meat because of the B12 deficiency that can occur without it. However, eating a smaller quantity of protein and a large amount of fruits and vegetables is very healthy and will be associated with a reduced incidence of heart disease, cancer, and other diseases of excess.

Throughout the history of time, man has hunted wild animals or tended livestock as a source for protein. About 10,000 years ago, large and small animals had been hunted almost to extinction. At this time man began to turn to grain for completion of their carbohydrate and protein needs. Grains can furnish nutrition, but in excess can elevate serum insulin levels and blood sugar, causing obesity, diabetes, heart disease, and other degenerative diseases. Because of this, choose your diet wisely and learn to balance

proteins, fats, and carbohydrates to stay healthy no matter whether you are vegetarian or meat-eater.