Pros & Cons of a Vegetarian Diet

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Nearly 5 million Americans, or more than 2 percent of the population, follow some form of a vegetarian diet. Although you might miss eating meat when you start a vegetarian diet, the benefits of vegetarianism can outweigh the disadvantages. Being aware of the pros and cons of a vegetarian diet can help you make the healthiest decisions if you try to follow one.

Pro: Better Weight Control: People who follow vegetarian-style eating patterns are less likely to become obese than individuals who do not follow such patterns. This may be partly the result of higher consumption of lower-calorie, more filling foods, such as vegetables, fruit and beans. Obesity is a risk factor for cardiovascular disease, high blood pressure, type-2 diabetes and some types of cancer, and more than one-third of American adults are obese. Cutting out high-calorie foods such as fatty meats, butter and full-fat cheeses can result in a diet that is lower in calories.

Con: Possible Nutrient Deficiencies: A well-planned vegetarian diet can be adequate in protein and most other essential nutrients, but vitamin B-12 is a nutrient that is only naturally in animal-based foods, such as meat, poultry, fish, eggs and dairy products. Lacto-ovo vegetarian diets include dairy products and eggs and can be sufficient in vitamin B-12, but individuals following vegan diets, which exclude dairy products and eggs, need to obtain vitamin B-12 from fortified foods or supplements. Vegan diets can include calcium from fortified sources, such as fortified orange juice and soy milk. Vegans also miss out on the omega-3 fats found in fatty fish. Walnuts and flaxseed provide omega-3 fatty acids, but supplements can provide additional heart-healthy benefits to make up for the lack of seafood in the diet.

Pro: Potential Health Benefits: Potential health benefits include a lower risk for cardiovascular disease, lower blood pressure and a longer life expectancy. A vegetarian diet can help you achieve these benefits as long as it includes food sources with potassium and dietary fiber, such as vegetables, fruits, legumes and whole grains. Cardiovascular benefits also come from avoiding fatty meats, which are high in saturated fat. In addition, vegetarian diets are low in dietary cholesterol, which is found only in animal-based foods and which can raise your levels of unhealthy low-density lipoprotein, or "bad" cholesterol, and your risk of heart disease.

Con: False Assumption of Automatic Health Benefits: Despite the potential health benefits of vegetarian diets, these results are not automatic. They are more likely when you mainly choose healthy foods, such as whole grains, fruits, vegetables, nuts, beans and seeds. Vegetarian diets that rely on refined grains, sweets, sugar-sweetened beverages and solid fats can be just as unhealthy as diets that include meat. French fries, doughnuts and snack cakes, for example, are vegetarian, but they can contain dangerous trans fats, which raise your unhealthy LDL cholesterol.
Is going vegetarian really better for you? The pros and cons of meatless eating

BY TRACY MILLER

From the "Meatless Mondays" trend to a recent scientific study that found vegetarians have a lower risk of dying from heart disease, going vegetarian gets a lot of positive press. And for good reason: besides the obvious benefits of adding fresh fruits and vegetables to your diet, a meatless diet can be better for the environment and lighter on your wallet. Plus, it's never been so easy, especially in New York, to find delicious vegetarian and even vegan meals in restaurants.

"In terms of heart health, there are a couple of reasons why vegetarian diets could be very healthy," says Lisa Young, PhD, RD, a nutritionist in private practice and an adjunct professor at New York University. "Meat and cheese are high in saturated fat, and eliminating that is a good thing for your heart." Saturated fat elevates blood levels of LDL cholesterol, so-called "bad" cholesterol that contributes to the hardening and narrowing of the arteries, putting you at higher risk for heart attack and stroke.

As a vegetarian, Young says, you’d ideally be eating more lentils, beans and legumes. These are good for heart health because they contain soluble fiber, which reduces cholesterol. It's hard to beat a piece of meat for protein. But vegetarians have plenty of ready sources of protein, too, including soy foods like tofu and tempeh, beans and lentils, nuts, some whole grains like quinoa, and dark leafy greens like spinach and kale.

"Protein is less of a problem than something like iron," Young says. "You have to work harder in terms of iron absorption." Iron from non-meat sources such as legumes or enriched pasta is harder for the body to absorb than iron from meat, "but the good news is, if you add vitamin C to your meal, that will aid in the absorption," Young says. "If you have pasta, adding tomato sauce will help."

Health benefits aside, going vegetarian is NOT a magic bullet for weight loss.

"I worked with one client who thought being vegetarian could help her lose weight. That could be true, or could not be true," Young says. "I've seen people gain weight on a vegetarian diet because all they eat is bread, rice and pasta. They don't incorporate nuts, beans and tofu. They just replace the meat with bread, bread, bread, and that's not good."

It's also important to remember that eating meat doesn't have to be bad for you — after all, humans have been doing it for millennia. The key is to stick to lean sources like skinless poultry, seafood and lean cuts of beef — and to control your serving size.

"The heart healthy way to be a meat eater is moderation," Young says. "Stick to a palm-sized serving and add more vegetables. A steakhouse steak might be 14 oz. Share the steak, and order an extra side of steamed veggies."
The Pros and Cons of Being a Vegetarian: What the Experts Say
by www.SixWise.com

More than 3 percent of U.S. adults are vegetarians, according to a new study, "Vegetarianism in America," by Vegetarian Times. But while this style of eating certainly has its devotees, it also has its fair share of critics. So, once and for all, what do the experts say about being a vegetarian? Is it a good choice, a bad choice or, perhaps, somewhere in between?

The Plus-Side to Being Vegetarian

Many experts agree that vegetarian diets are good for you. According to the American Dietetic Association, for instance, "Vegetarian plans tend to result in lower rates of heart disease, high blood pressure, type 2 diabetes and some forms of cancer. Vegetarians also tend to have lower body mass indexes and cholesterol levels."

Meanwhile, according to research studies posted on GoVeg.com:

- Vegetarians are 50 percent less likely to develop heart disease, and they have a 40 percent lower cancer rate of meat-eaters.
- Meat-eaters are nine times more likely to be obese than vegans (who don't eat any animal products) are.
- Vegetarians have stronger immune systems than meat-eaters.
- Vegetarians and vegans live, on average, six to 10 years longer than meat-eaters.

Abstaining from meat, experts say, also helps the environment. According to GoVeg, eating one pound of meat emits the same amount of greenhouse gases as driving an SUV 40 miles. And in 2006 the United Nations called the meat industry "one of the top two or three most significant contributors to the most serious environmental problems, at every scale from local to global."

Another plus side often given by vegetarian advocates is the humane treatment of animals. Factory farms, which supply much of the United States' meat, are widely known for their inhumane treatment of animals, and as a vegetarian or vegan you don't support that industry (at least to the extent a conventional meat-eater might).

The Down-Side to Being a Vegetarian

According to the Weston A. Price Foundation, a vegetarian diet is far from ideal, mostly because it lacks animal fats, which some experts say are necessary for human health.

"Scientific evidence [shows] that humans need animal foods, particularly animal fats, for optimum health," they say.

"The Foundation believes that strict vegetarianism (veganism) is detrimental to human health. Vegetarianism that includes eggs and raw (unpasteurized) dairy products, organic vegetables and fruits, properly prepared whole grains, legumes, and nuts, and excludes unfermented soy products and processed foods, can be a healthy option for some people. However, some people have difficulty assimilating vitamins, minerals, protein, and other factors from plant foods. These individuals may need a higher proportion of nutrients from animal foods to achieve optimum health."
The late Stephen Byrnes, PhD, RNCP, wrote an article in the Townsend Letter for Doctors & Patients that dispelled many "myths" about the benefits of vegetarianism. In it he said, "many of the vegetarian claims cannot be substantiated and some are simply false and dangerous. There are benefits to vegetarian diets for certain health conditions, and some people function better on less fat and protein, but, as a practitioner who has dealt with several former vegetarians and vegans (total vegetarians), I know full well the dangerous effects of a diet devoid of healthful animal products."

The article also quotes H. Leon Abrams who said, "Humans have always been meat-eaters. The fact that no human society is entirely vegetarian, and those that are almost entirely vegetarian suffer from debilitated conditions of health, seems unequivocally to prove that a plant diet must be supplemented with at least a minimum amount of animal protein to sustain health.

Humans are meat-eaters and always have been. Humans are also vegetable eaters and always have been, but plant foods must be supplemented by an ample amount of animal protein to maintain optimal health."

What about all of the saturated fats in animal foods? According to the Weston A. Price Foundation, they're actually good for you. Here they describe the many roles of saturated fats:

"Contrary to the accepted view, which is not scientifically based, saturated fats do not clog arteries or cause heart disease. In fact, the preferred food for the heart is saturated fat; and saturated fats lower a substance called Lp(a), which is a very accurate marker for proneness to heart disease.

Saturated fats play many important roles in the body chemistry. They strengthen the immune system and are involved in inter-cellular communication, which means they protect us against cancer. They help the receptors on our cell membranes work properly, including receptors for insulin, thereby protecting us against diabetes. The lungs cannot function without saturated fats, which is why children given butter and full-fat milk have much less asthma than children given reduced-fat milk and margarine. Saturated fats are also involved in kidney function and hormone production.

Saturated fats are required for the nervous system to function properly, and over half the fat in the brain is saturated. Saturated fats also help suppress inflammation. Finally, saturated animal fats carry the vital fat-soluble vitamins A, D and K2, which we need in large amounts to be healthy.

Human beings have been consuming saturated fats from animals products, milk products and the tropical oils for thousands of years; it is the advent of modern processed vegetable oil that is associated with the epidemic of modern degenerative disease, not the consumption of saturated fats."

Feeling confused? You're not alone. There's a lot of conflicting information out there when it comes to diet and nutrition. While the experts continue to battle it out over whether vegetarianism is healthy or harmful, you can take comfort in the fact that there is no right diet for everyone. You need to eat a diet that feels right for you, and that is one thing that almost everyone can agree on.