

The Vegan Diet: Why It Is a Big Deal

Recent studies show that more and more people in the U.S. are choosing to reduce or give up meat in their diet because of the growing body of evidence linking meat consumption to obesity, digestive problems, heart disease, some types of cancer, type 2 diabetes, stroke, arthritis, and early death.

What is the problem with meat? Most people eat conventional factory farmed meat, which may have risks due to the presence of chemicals or diseases. On top of that, most people eat way too much of it. Americans consume 60 percent more meat than Europeans and 4 times more than other developed countries. One study found that meat-eaters are 27 percent more likely to die early and 20 percent more likely to die of cancer.

Out of an estimated 16 million vegetarians, (5 percent of the population) about 8 million people are vegan. So, when people give up meat, they either switch to a vegetarian diet (no meat but the diet includes eggs and dairy) or the new trend, which is vegan (no meat, or dairy, or animal-derived products).

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Why Do People Eat Vegan?

There are usually 3 reasons why people choose a vegan diet:

- to protest the exploitation/cruelty of animals by the agricultural industry
- to reduce the environmental costs of agriculture
- to improve their overall health and live a healthier life

To Protect Animals

Many people choose a vegan lifestyle because they are against the exploitation of animals by the agriculture industry. Vegans believe animals should not be used against their will and made to suffer and die as resources for human needs.

Vegans believe animals are sentient beings with rights not unlike humans. Vegans are against animal testing, large animal breeding factories, and poultry, cattle, and dairy operations where animals are often kept in less than ideal conditions. There are reports of animal cruelty in many livestock operations. Ten billion animals are slaughtered every year for human consumption in the U.S.

Protect the Environment

Vegans are against the environmental costs of livestock agriculture, including the use of large amounts of land and water, use of chemicals like pesticides and fertilizers, topsoil erosion, and pollution. According to the EPA, chemical and animal waste runoff pollutes more than 173,000 miles of rivers and streams annually and is the nation's leading cause of impaired water quality. Nearly 20% of worldwide pollution is attributed to the meat industry.

Resource use is a concern to vegans. It is estimated that it takes 40 calories of fossil-fuel energy to create every 1 calorie of feed-lot beef in the U.S., but it only takes 2.2 calories of energy to create plant proteins.

In addition, 70% of the grain produced in the U.S. is used to feed animals raised for slaughter. Livestock animals consume five times as much grain as is eaten by the population. According to a Cornell University professor of ecology, David Pimentel, if that same amount were used to feed people directly, nearly 800 million people could be fed globally.

Researchers at Loma Linda University in California have concluded that consumption of meat and dairy should be drastically reduced in order to cut the environmental footprint (use of resources). They rated vegetarians and vegans as requiring 30 percent fewer resources.

To Improve Overall Health

Statistics show that most Americans eat an overabundance of foods that are high in fat, sugar, and the added chemicals contained in processed foods. The vegan diet is designed to eliminate many of the health risks associated with meat consumption, (such as higher risk of disease) and increase consumption of healthy raw foods like vegetables, nuts, grains and fruits. Vegans (and vegetarians) are known to have lower cholesterol levels, lower blood pressure, lower body/mass indexes (less fat), and lower rates for type 2 diabetes, heart disease, and cancer. So, the vegan diet, when combined with a healthy exercise lifestyle, especially for those who actively work out or compete in athletic events, produces healthier people.

Why is Vegan Better?

A vegan diet can be healthier than a conventional diet for many reasons. Vegan foods include whole grains, a variety of vegetables, fruits, and beans, that are rich in essential vitamins, contain lots of needed fiber, are low in fat, and contain no cholesterol. Calcium is derived from eating vegetables like broccoli, kale, collard greens, tofu, fortified juices, and nut milks (soymilk, almond milk, etc.). Iron is obtained from eating things like chickpeas, spinach, pinto beans, and soy products. Vitamin B12 (which does not occur naturally in plants) can be supplemented in pill form or in products that are fortified with it. Most fruits and vegetables contain essential ingredients like carbohydrates,

vitamins, folate, minerals like magnesium and potassium, antioxidants, and phytochemicals (carotenoids, anthocyanins) which help prevent disease.

Some people believe they cannot eat vegan because they won't get enough protein, but vegans get protein from many sources. For example, green vegetables like kale, broccoli, seaweed, peas, and spinach are good sources of protein and so are various kinds of beans like lima, black, pinto, edamame, and lentils. Grains are another way to get protein and these include brown rice, whole wheat bread, pasta, quinoa, and bulgar. Nuts such as peanuts, pistachios, almonds, cashews, and walnuts are protein rich. Vegans also eat lots of berries, (strawberries, blueberries, etc.) because they contain antioxidants and phytochemicals.

The Problems with Meat, Dairy, and Fish

Meat

The standard American diet is usually centered around red meat. But when red meat is consumed in excess quantities, it can cause a person to have higher than normal levels of cholesterol and saturated fats. Diets rich in animal fats are associated with higher risks for obesity, heart disease, type 2 diabetes, osteoporosis, hypertension, and several types of cancer. Red meat also contains carnitine, which causes hardening of the arteries, and studies show that increased carnitine is associated with increased cardiovascular disease. A meat diet may cause an excess of iron, which studies show can increase your chances for Alzheimer's disease and colorectal cancer. Most of the processed meat (lunchmeat) is unhealthy because it contains carcinogenic compounds.

The FDA reports that foods high in protein such as meat, poultry, and seafood can cause outbreaks of foodborne

illnesses like E.coli and salmonella. Additives are used in the meat industry to enhance the color and appearance of meat, like pink slime and meat glue, which have questionable health benefits.

The EPA estimates that 95% of pesticide residue in the American diet comes from meat, fish, and dairy products.

People on a meat diet have shorter lives and more disability later in life, according to author Michael F. Roizen, M.D., author of *"The Real Age Diet"*. He says animal products clog your arteries, give you less energy, slow down your immune system, and increase the rates of cognitive and sexual dysfunction.

Dairy

Recent studies are showing that as many as 75 % of the world's adult population may be lactose intolerant, which can cause a number of health problems. Milk products like cheese and yogurt have been heavily promoted as part of a healthy diet in the U.S. for many years, and only recently has evidence been coming out to the contrary. High intake of dairy products can raise an individual's cholesterol levels which can lead to obesity, digestive problems, and heart disease. The problem comes from the combination of animal products derived from unhealthy animals and a diet high in refined sugar.

According to Dr. Mark Hyman, M.D. of the Institute for Medical Functional Medicine, dairy consumption has not been proven to increase athletic performance. It does not protect bone strength and may even reduce it. And he says dairy products can increase a man's risk of prostate cancer by 50%.

Dairy animals are often given supplemental steroids, growth hormones, and antibiotics, all of which may pose health hazards to humans. There has been concern over whether these additives can cause cancer in humans, but the scientific

evidence is inconclusive.

Fish

Fish, although high in protein, can contain varying amounts of carcinogens like PCBs and DDT and also heavy metals like mercury, arsenic, lead, and cadmium. These contaminants are linked to cancer, reproductive problems, and neurological deficits.

Conclusion

With all the growing evidence pointing to the health hazards associated with a meat-centered diet, it is no wonder that more people are adopting a vegan (and vegetarian) diet. The benefits are obvious for anyone who wants to live a longer and healthier life. And, with the number of people eating vegan, it is not surprising that an increasing number of restaurants catering to vegetarians and vegans, and there are also numerous meat and dairy substitutes now available to consumers.

Recommended Reading:

- *Total Nutrition – Make your own Homemade Multivitamin and Mineral Formula*
- 10 Vegan-Friendly Sources Of Protein
- Animal vs. Plant Protein – What's Better?

Sources:

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- *11 Convincing Reasons that Going Vegan Isn't Crazy* – Reader's Digest
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cut-consumption-of-meat-and-dairy – Food Navigator USA

- *10 Reasons To Stop Eating Red Meat* – Prevention
- *Why Go Veg?* – Vegetarian Times
- *Dairy: 6 Reasons You Should Avoid It at all Costs* – Dr. Mark Hyman