

— DON HALL, DRPH, CHES —

The Vegetarian Advantage

Live longer, healthier,
and happier



Pacific Press® Publishing Association

Nampa, Idaho

Oshawa, Ontario, Canada

www.pacificpress.com

Introduction

Why Be a Vegetarian?

People have many reasons for making the switch to a vegetarian diet. Some see it as a way to lighten their impact on the environment and preserve natural resources. Others respect animals and are ethically opposed to eating them. Still others want to stay healthy and live longer. Whatever the case, a diet based on plant foods does have many advantages, especially when it comes to people's physical and mental health.

Thanks to an abundance of scientific research that demonstrates the health and environmental benefits of a plant-based diet, even the federal government now recommends that we consume most of our calories from vegetables, fruits, legumes, nuts, and whole grains.¹ And no wonder: a recent newsletter says that scientists at Tufts University now estimate that 70 percent of all diseases—including a third of all cancers—are related to diet.²

A vegetarian diet enables you to avoid contracting the diseases that food animals carry. It reduces your risk of developing chronic degenerative diseases, including obesity, coronary artery disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, and certain cancers, among them colon, breast, prostate, stomach, lung, and esophageal cancer. It can also help you preserve your brain, maintain a healthy weight, keep your bones strong, and live longer as well as better.

These days, finding great-tasting and good-for-you vegetarian foods takes almost no effort, whether you're strolling the aisles of your local supermarket or walking down the street at lunchtime. If you need inspiration in the kitchen, look no further than the Internet, your favorite bookseller, or your local vegetarian society's newsletter. They all offer culinary tips and great recipes. And today, almost all ethnic restaurants offer vegetarian

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selections. Are you in a hurry? Fast-food and fast-casual restaurants now include healthful and inventive salads, sandwiches, and entrées on their menus.

So the real question isn't why go vegetarian. It's why haven't you gone vegetarian already?

1. United States Department of Agriculture, "Setting the Stage and Integrating the Evidence," in *Report of the Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee on the Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2010*, last modified July 13, 2010, <http://www.cnpp.usda.gov/DGAs2010-DGACReport.htm>.

2. "Eating to Beat Cancer," special supplement, *Tufts University Health & Nutrition Letter* (May 2007).

Avoid Diseases Animals Carry

A man noticed that I had lots of produce but no meat in my shopping cart, and he asked if I was a vegetarian. I said Yes and told him I had been one all my life. “Oh that’s great,” he said. “I wish my wife and I had been vegetarians all our lives. She has just found out that she has Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease, and the doctor says she has less than six months to live. We’re vegetarians now, but it’s too late for her.”

Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease is a fatal form of encephalitis caused by prions—abnormal proteins found in the brain tissue of diseased cows. It can infect humans who eat that brain tissue. Some wild animals carry a similar disease—chronic wasting disease—also passed on to humans who eat their flesh. A friend of mine, a healthy young man, contracted this disease and died within a few months of the diagnosis.

In December 2003, the first case of mad cow disease, another prion-caused disease that is passed on to people in the flesh of infected cows, was found in Washington State. The disease may lie dormant in a person for years and then take its victim’s life soon after symptoms begin to show up. People don’t get prions from carrots or whole-wheat bread, only from infected animals, mostly beef.

A medical Web site¹ offers the following recommendations to those who wish to avoid Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease: Don’t eat beef. Avoid beef products that may contain bits of spinal cord or brain tissue—that means ground beef, sausage, and hot dogs, among other things. And when traveling to areas where mad cow disease has been more common, such as the United Kingdom and continental Europe, avoid having blood transfusions. (The donors may have been exposed to prions and now carry them in their blood.)

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Diseases you can avoid

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that there are 76 million cases of food-borne disease yearly, resulting in 325,000 hospitalizations and 5,000 deaths.² Here are a few of the more common health problems you can cut your risk of contracting by becoming a vegetarian.

Salmonella infection. *Salmonella* is a bacterium that lives in the intestines of many animals and birds. People become infected with the bacteria when they eat contaminated foods—mostly foods of animal origin, such as beef, poultry, milk, and eggs. More than 1.4 million cases of *Salmonella* infection are reported every year in the United States.³ Because many cases don't require hospitalization, estimates of the actual number of infections run as high as twenty million cases yearly, resulting in an annual toll of up to one thousand deaths. *Salmonella* is the most common cause of food poisoning; being a vegetarian greatly reduces one's risk of contracting this disease.

E. coli infection. Another very common and serious bacterial infection found primarily in animal foods is *Escherichia coli* (*E. coli*). Common sources of infection include raw milk, cheese made from raw milk, and improperly cooked ground beef. These high-risk foods can also contaminate other foods. *E. coli* infections can be very serious, resulting in bloody diarrhea, cramps, kidney damage, and death.

Recommendations for preventing *E. coli* infection include avoiding raw milk and other unpasteurized dairy products, washing one's hands after contact with animals or raw meat, preventing cross-contamination of other foods by raw beef, and if you eat meat, cooking it thoroughly. Being a vegetarian greatly reduces one's risk of suffering an *E. coli* infection.

Parasites. Animals can become infected with parasites and then transmit them to humans. The classic example is the infection of pork with trichina worms. If the meat isn't thoroughly cooked, people eating it can become infected with these parasitic worms. Trichinosis used to be a problem in Western countries, but pigs are raised differently in these countries now, so

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pork produced there isn't likely to be infected with trichinosis. However, this disease is still common in underdeveloped countries; and in Western countries as well as elsewhere, the meat of wild animals can be a source of infection.

Other parasites can be found in many animals used as food, including fish. While fishing in Alaska a few years ago, my companions and I found that even in isolated lakes that were miles from civilization, the fish were loaded with parasites. Sticking to a vegetarian diet is a good way to minimize your risk of becoming infected with parasites.

Hormones and antibiotics. Many people today are concerned by the common practice of routinely giving hormones and antibiotics to animals—for example, cows and chickens—to increase their milk and egg production and their weight gain. Recently, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration said it estimated that as much as 30 to 70 percent of all the antibiotics currently used in the U.S. are fed to animals for this purpose.⁴ Animals treated frequently with antibiotics can become incubators that grow “superbugs”—germs immune to those antibiotics. Infections produced by these superbugs are very difficult to treat. Eating a vegetarian diet is the best way to avoid this problem.

Cruel treatment of animals. While living in Southern California, I often passed dairy and beef feedlots. The cows were packed into fenced yards, in which all living grass and plants had been trampled out of existence, leaving the poor creatures to stand in their own muddy filth. The smell was horrendous, and the living conditions abominable. Many chicken farms operate similarly, squeezing fifteen to twenty birds into cages so small that they can hardly turn around. How can people expect such crowded, filthy environments to produce healthy meat? And aren't the people who purchase what these farms produce, supporting these cruel methods?

These are a few of the concerns people have about eating foods of animal origin. It's these concerns that have set people to looking for healthier alternatives. The great variety of vegetarian foods available today makes a vegetarian diet an easily

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attained and healthy alternative to a diet that features a lot of meat.

1. “Mad Cow Disease and Variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease Causes, Symptoms, Treatments,” eMedicineHealth, accessed September 16, 2010, http://www.emedicinehealth.com/mad_cow_disease_and_variant_creutzfeldt-jakob_dis/page7_em.htm.

2. “Disease Listing, Foodborne Illness, General Information,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, accessed September 16, 2010, http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dbmd/diseaseinfo/foodborneinfections_g.htm.

3. Jennifer G. Wright et al., “Multidrug-resistant Salmonella Typhimurium in Four Animal Facilities,” *Emerging Infectious Diseases* 11, no. 8 (2005): 1235–1241.

4. Bridget M. Kuehn, “FDA Targets Antibiotic Use in Livestock,” *Journal of the American Medical Association* 304, no. 4 (2010): 396.