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Wanna Be a Vegetarian?

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Want to give up meat, but worry that you'll miss out on flavor and important nutrients? Fear that you'll end up gorging on carbs and getting fat? And wait, isn't being a vegetarian too complicated? Don't give in to popular myths. Our chefs give you the facts and tell you how to get enough protein, flavor and more to be a vegetarian...

What if you could wave a magic wand to feel healthier, get slimmer and reduce your risk of dying from heart disease, while also lowering your chances of developing diabetes, cancer and other ailments – from diverticulitis to dementia?

A no-brainer, right?

Six to eight million people think so. That's how many Americans have adopted vegetarian eating.

“Vegetarian diets – which contain no beef, pork, poultry, fish or shellfish – are naturally low in saturated fat, high in fiber, and packed with essential nutrients, vitamins, minerals and cancer-fighting compounds,” says Neal Barnard, M.D., adjunct professor of medicine at George Washington University and president and founder of the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine, a nutrition advocacy organization that promotes vegetarian eating.

Still not convinced? Vegetarians tend to be slimmer than meat-eaters, according to a 2005 Tufts University study of 55,459 women.

While 40% of the non-vegetarians were overweight or obese, only 25% of the lacto-vegetarians (who eat no meat, poultry, fish or eggs) were overweight.

Improved health isn't the only bonus of a vegetarian diet.

“Being vegetarian makes me feel good about myself,” says Jay Lavine, M.D., who authors [The Nutrition MD website](#), a source for information on what he calls “the optimal diet.”

“Eating has become a spiritual experience and constant reminder that I'm serving a higher purpose,” he says. “The result is a long-lasting inner happiness, as opposed to a transient pleasure.”

After a lifetime of believing a meal isn't complete without meat, doubts are understandable. Read on for information about vegetarian diets from registered dietitians and chefs, along with tips for making the transition.

Myth #1: I won't get enough protein.

The truth: *It's easy to be a vegetarian and get the protein you need.*

Your body needs 0.8 grams of protein per kilogram of body weight, according to the latest Recommended Dietary Allowance (RDA). That translates to 0.36 grams of protein per pound.

“So, if you weigh 140 pounds, you need about 50 grams of protein [a day],” says Susan Levin, R.D., director of Nutrition Education for the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine.

That’s easy on a vegetarian diet. Enjoy a bagel smeared with peanut butter for breakfast (4 grams for 1 tablespoon of peanut butter and 10 grams for the bagel); veggie burger for lunch, between 2 slices of whole-wheat bread (depending on the brand, can be 13 grams, plus 4 grams for the bread); and an afternoon snack of a cup of yogurt (14 grams) and a handful of almonds (8 grams in a 1/4 cup).

You’ve already met your daily protein requirement, and it’s not even dinnertime.

“If you consume enough calories, you’ll get enough protein,” Levin adds. “Most Americans get twice the recommended amount.”

Even some vegetables are high in protein.

For example, “broccoli gets one-third of its calories from protein,” Levin says. When cooked, it weighs in at 4 grams of protein per cup.

Legumes (beans, peas, lentils) are another good protein source.

“If you eat a cup of beans a day, along with whole grains, vegetables, nuts and seeds, you’ll get enough protein,” says Jill Nussinow, R.D., chef/instructor and registered dietitian at Santa Rosa Junior College in California, and author of a cookbook called *The Veggie Queen: Vegetables Get the Royal Treatment* (Vegetarian Connection Press).

Like rice? You’ll love protein-packed quinoa.

Pronounced KEEN-wah, the South American seed is extremely easy to prepare, says Jeff Stanford, owner of Ravens, a fine-dining vegetarian restaurant on the Mendocino, Calif.

“Just put washed seeds into water and boil for 15 minutes. Drain and serve,” Stanford says.

“Quinoa risotto with grilled spring vegetables is beautiful and delicious.”

To see how your favorite foods stack up, the protein content of many foods is listed [here](#).

Myth #2: Vegetarian diets make you fat.

The truth: *If you load up on cheese, junk food and white carbs (pizza, pasta, white bread), you may gain weight.*

“Being a ‘pizzatarian’ or ‘carbotarian’ won’t do anyone good,” Nussinow says. “Cheese, dairy and eggs are high in fat, saturated fat and cholesterol.”

That’s because white carbs – as opposed to whole grains that are full of healthful fiber and nutrients – are full of empty calories and lead to weight gain, says the Harvard School of Public Health.

“Oreos are vegan, but that doesn’t mean they’re good for you,” says Alexandra Caspero, R.D., campus dietitian for University of the Pacific and owner of Delicious Knowledge in Stockton, Calif., a nutritional counseling service.

“Vegetarians who turn to chips, candy and cupcakes may gain weight,” she says. “Or if you eat a lot of

cheese – cheese enchiladas, quesadillas, cheese sandwiches – you will also increase the amount of saturated fat and calories in your diet.”

Myth #3: Vegetarians have to compensate with vitamins and other supplements.

The truth: Strict vegans, people who eschew all meat, fish, eggs and dairy, need to ensure they get ample vitamin B12 and omega-3.

Vegetarians *are* more likely to have too-low concentrations of vitamin B12 – found in highest levels in fish and meat – and omega-3 fatty acids (fish oil), according to a new (February 2011) review by Zhejiang University in China, published in the *Journal of Agricultural and Food Chemistry*.

But vitamin B12 also can be found in fortified non-dairy milks, energy bars and breakfast cereals. You can also take supplements, but first consult your doctor before taking this or any other supplement.

For vegetarians who want to avoid fish oil capsules, omega-3 is found in ground flaxseeds, walnuts, canola oil and soy, as well as in vegan supplements.

Fortified nutritional yeast is a complete protein and a great way to sneak vitamin B12 in your daily diet. (Tasty tip: Try sprinkling it on popcorn.)

“I used to use it as a substitute for Parmesan cheese,” Levin says. “But now I add it to most of my foods because it tastes delicious and provides a B-vitamin boost.”

Myth #4: Vegetarians don’t get enough iron.

The truth: *Vegetarians are no more likely to have iron deficiencies than non-vegetarians.*

While vegetarians tend to have lower iron stores than meat-eaters, the “incidence of iron-deficiency anemia among vegetarians is similar to that of non-vegetarians,” according to the American Dietetic Association (ADA).

“But the form of iron found in plants is not as well absorbed [by the body] as that found in meat,” Lavine says.

That’s why the ADA suggests that vegetarians try to get 1.8 times more iron than people who eat meat.

Foods high in iron include dried fruit, beans and peas, lentils, enriched cereals, whole grains, baked potatoes (with the skin) and dark leafy vegetables, says the Mayo Clinic.

An easy way to ward off anemia: Cook with a cast iron skillet. It increases foods’ iron content.

Also, eat fruits and vegetables with vitamin C, such as strawberries and citrus.

“When eaten with iron-rich plant foods, they enhance absorption,” Lavine says.

But “iron is not a major concern to most people, and pregnant women, who have high iron needs, can always take a supplement,” he says.

Myth #5: Preparing vegetarian meals is complicated and labor-intensive.

The truth: *Many of your favorite quick dishes can be easily modified and made meatless.*

“Just eat what you’re used to,” Nussinow says. For example, “if you eat chili, switch to vegetarian chili.”

Besides, “a lot of foods you already eat are vegetarian: hummus, guacamole – even pizza, if you get rid of the fatty pepperoni and top with lots of vegetables,” she says.

Of course, veggie burgers and other meat substitutes (chickenless nuggets, tofu-turkey, and so forth) are an option.

But don't rely on fake meats, because they're very processed, full of preservatives and sodium, warns Nussinow.

If you're craving a burger, "try a large Portobello mushroom," Stanford says. "Just brush with oil and balsamic vinegar; then grill or broil."

More simple and nutritious meat substitutes:

"Instead of tuna, mash garbanzo beans and mix with tuna salad ingredients for a sandwich filling. Swap black beans for ground beef in tacos. And tempeh (made from fermented soybeans), seitan (a high-protein meat substitute pronounced SAY-tan, made from wheat gluten) and tofu can be placed anywhere meat is used," Caspero says.

Ready to Go Raw?

Going "raw" means giving up all of your favorite foods, right? Not quite. From snacks to gourmet meals, there's a wide variety of raw dishes certain to please the pickiest of palates. Take this [raw food quiz](#) to find out if "raw" is somewhere you'd like to visit.

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