People choose to become vegetarians for a number of reasons – ranging from family and peer pressure, to concerns about animal welfare, the environment and recent food safety scares – but a growing number are making the switch because of the health benefits of giving up meat and animal products.

I am not a vegetarian myself but have long supported and encouraged patients of mine who have decided to give vegetarianism a try. Unfortunately vegetarianism remains surrounded by all sorts of myths and prejudices – many of them founded historically by a sceptical medical profession. Attitudes are changing rapidly as more and more evidence emerges showing the health benefits of giving up meat and animal products but, like all healthy diets, getting the most out of becoming a vegetarian requires a bit of research and planning, and there is no better place to turn to for advice than the Vegetarian Society.

Dr Mark Porter MB BS DA DCH

Vegetarian diets

The are over 3 million vegetarians in the United Kingdom, with thousands more changing their diet every week, and many millions more worldwide. It is widely recognised that a vegetarian diet is nutritionally adequate, and such a diet typically follows current healthy eating advice of including more fruit and vegetables together with starchy and high fibre foods in the diet, and reducing the amount of fat, especially saturated fat, consumed.

A vegetarian is someone living on a diet of grains, pulses, nuts, seeds, vegetables and fruits with or without the use of dairy products and eggs (preferably free-range).

People become vegetarian for many reasons, perhaps because they object to the slaughter of animals for food, because of environmental concerns, for religious reasons or for health reasons.

Vegetarians do not eat meat, poultry or fish, and avoid all slaughterhouse byproducts such as gelatine. They generally eat dairy produce and eggs and as such are termed lacto-ovo vegetarians. Some vegetarians, known as lacto vegetarians, also avoid eggs, and others, known as vegans, consume no animal products at all.

Benefits

A vegetarian diet can confer a wide range of health benefits. Research has shown vegetarians suffer less from obesity, coronary heart disease, high blood pressure, type II diabetes, certain
diet related cancers, diverticular disease, appendicitis, constipation and gallstones.

**Particular nutrients**

You may have heard that although a vegetarian diet is higher in many beneficial nutrients than an omnivorous diet, notably anti-oxidants and fibre (or non-starch polysaccharides), it may be more difficult to obtain sufficient amounts of a few nutrients commonly found in meat. This is simply not the case.

- **IRON**

Iron deficiency is one of the most common nutritional problems in a typical British diet. Research shows vegetarians are no more prone to iron deficiency than meat-eaters, in fact only 14% of iron in the household food supply is obtained from meat and meat products. Iron is found in leafy green vegetables, pulses, wholemeal bread, dried fruit and pumpkin seeds. Including Vitamin C with a meal (such as a glass of orange juice) can increase the amount of iron absorbed by threefold. Tea can reduce the amount of iron absorbed.

- **VITAMIN B12**

B12 should not be a concern for vegetarians consuming dairy products and eggs, however vegans should look out for fortified foods such as breakfast cereals and soya drinks, since B12 is not naturally found in plant foods.

- **CALCIUM**

Again should not be a problem for vegetarians consuming dairy produce. It is also found in leafy green vegetables, almonds, sesame seeds, dried fruit, pulses and fortified soya drinks.

- **PROTEIN**

Many years ago it was thought that since most vegetarian sources of protein do not contain all the eight essential amino acids in the right proportions it was necessary to combine different vegetarian sources at each meal to produce a “complete protein”. However it is now understood that since the body holds a short term pool of amino acids there is no need to worry about complementing amino acids all the time so long as the diet is a varied and well balanced one.

Good vegetarian sources of protein include beans, lentils, nuts, seeds, grains, soya products, dairy products and eggs.

- **FATTY ACIDS**

The omega-3 essential fatty acids found in oily fish are also found in vegetarian foods such as rapeseed oil, flax seeds and walnuts. Or if you wanted to take a supplement, you can buy them made from algae rather than fish livers.
The “Balance of Good Health” advice given to the general population equally applies to vegetarians. A healthy diet includes plenty of fruit and vegetables and starchy foods, moderate amounts of alternatives to meat and fish, and moderate amounts of dairy produce or alternatives, and small amounts of foods containing fat and sugar.

The following advice need not be strictly adhered to every day, but as long as the general diet essentially follows the guidelines outlined a balanced and healthy diet should be achieved.

**Fruit and Vegetables**

5 PORTIONS DAILY

Fresh, frozen, juiced, canned or dried fruit and vegetables. Supply in particular vitamins, minerals and fibre.

**Alternatives to meat and fish**

2-3 PORTIONS DAILY

Include a variety of pulses, nuts, seeds, eggs and other soya, mycoprotein and wheat proteins in the diet to ensure adequate intakes of protein, minerals and vitamins.
Balance of good health

Bread, other cereals and potatoes

5 PORTIONS DAILY
Make these starchy foods the basis of most meals. Try to include wholemeal or wholegrain versions when possible. Avoid adding too much fat. Supply carbohydrates, fibre, protein and some vitamins and minerals.

Milk and dairy products

2-3 PORTIONS DAILY
Good sources of calcium, protein and some vitamins. If avoiding dairy foods, choose fortified soya, rice or oat drinks or ensure other foods high in calcium are included.

Foods containing fat, foods containing sugar

0-3 PORTIONS DAILY
Although some fat is needed in the diet, eat these foods sparingly, and look out for low fat alternatives.

A portion size equates to, for example, a slice of bread, an apple, a glass of milk or two tablespoons of baked beans.
Special needs

■ PREGNANCY
During pregnancy, women have increased nutritional requirements for energy, protein, folate, iron and vitamins A, C and D.

The increased energy and protein requirements are small and can be met without any major changes in food intake. If energy intake is reduced due to appetite changes or morning sickness, then a reduction in high fibre foods and an increase in energy and nutrient-dense foods may be appropriate. The extra vitamins needed are generally present at higher levels in vegetarian diets, with the exception of vitamin D. Both vegetarian and non-vegetarian pregnant women may be advised to take supplementary vitamin D.

■ CHILDREN
Infants, children and adolescents can meet all of their nutritional requirements on a vegetarian diet, a fact recognised by the British Medical Association and the British Dietetic Association. Nutrient intakes for vegetarian children compare favourably with dietary recommendations providing that total fat intakes are not excessive and iron intakes are adequate. However, a healthy adult diet is not necessarily appropriate for infants and young children under the age of five years. Diets low in fat and high in fibre are unsuitable for infants as their limited stomach capacity may be filled up before they are able to meet their energy or nutrient needs. Infant diets need to include energy and nutrient-dense foods such as cereal products, mashed lentils, vegetable oils, bananas and avocados. Excessive intake of high fibre and watery foods should be avoided. Contact the Society for more detailed free information on weaning and feeding growing children healthily.

■ TEENAGERS
Teenagers do not need significantly different levels of any nutrients in their diet, though in the late teens slightly more energy and protein are required. However iron is particularly important for both males and females at this age, with girls’ iron requirements increasing significantly once their periods start.

For further information on any specific areas of vegetarian nutrition such as infant diets or on any particular nutrients, or for details of scientific studies backing up the healthiness of such a diet please contact the Vegetarian Society.

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