

## A Vegetarian Diet Can Be Healthy and Taste Good, Too!

A growing body of scientific research shows that a well-planned vegetarian diet can be nutritionally adequate and may reduce the risk of several chronic diseases Americans face today.

### What is a Vegetarian Diet?

While vegetarianism has been gaining popularity in the United States for the past several decades, people have been following a plant-based diet in the U.S. and worldwide for centuries. A vegetarian diet consists primarily of plant-based foods like fruits, vegetables, legumes, grains, nuts and seeds. Most people think of vegetarians simply as individuals who do not consume meat. While this is typically the case, there is variation in categories of vegetarians, determined by what they do include in their diet:

- **Lactovegetarian:** consumes plant-based foods such as fruits, vegetables and grains as well dairy. (No meat or eggs.)
- **Lacto-ovovegetarian:** consumes a similar diet to the lactovegetarian but also consumes eggs.
- **Vegan** (*vee-gan*): *total* or *strict* vegetarian, consumes only plant-based foods and excludes all foods of animal origin (meat, fish, fowl, dairy, eggs or foods prepared with ingredients of animal origin).

While an individual who consumes primarily French fries, soda, and other non-meat, processed foods in his diet might technically consider himself a vegetarian, the health benefits of the vegetarian diet come from incorporating a varied diet rich with plant-based foods, prepared healthfully, and eaten in moderate portions.

### Reasons for Becoming a Vegetarian

There are many reasons individuals choose to follow a vegetarian diet. Aside from the potential health advantages, other reasons stem from environmental concerns, world hunger issues, ethical considerations and religious beliefs.

### Reducing Risk of Chronic Diseases

In recent years, increasing studies have demonstrated potential benefits of a vegetarian diet over the typical American omnivore diet in reducing risk of several diseases and conferring benefits. Evidence shows that vegetarians have lower total cholesterol and LDL (*bad*) cholesterol, less hypertension and less risk of heart disease. Vegetarians are less likely to be obese or have Type 2 Diabetes. In addition, vegetarians are less likely to have certain cancers including colon, breast and lung cancer. Because of these positive findings, the American Dietetic Association has taken an official position that vegetarian diets *are healthful and nutritionally adequate when appropriately planned*.

### Special Considerations for Vegetarians

Vegetarian diets can be satisfying and meet all the nutrition needs of an individual. Careful planning, however, is necessary to assure that a variety of foods are

consumed from the different food groups. Lactovegetarians and lacto-ovovegetarians have few if any problems meeting or exceeding their nutritional needs assuming they eat a mixture of fruits, vegetables, grains, legumes, nuts, seeds, dairy (and eggs if desired) on an regular basis. A total vegetarian (vegan) diet requires more careful planning to make sure that vegans are getting enough protein and certain vitamins and minerals in their diet. Of special consideration are vitamin B12 (only found in animal products), vitamin D, and calcium. With a little planning, and supplementation if necessary, vegans can meet their nutritional requirements.

Consultation with a Registered Dietitian and primary care physician is advised for vegetarian women who become pregnant, during lactation and for parents who wish to raise their children on a vegetarian diet. Because these are times of important growth and development, special attention must be given to careful planning of a nutritionally adequate diet. Special consideration is warranted for Seniors (over 50 years) who wish to continue or begin a vegetarian diet because of potential age-related changes that depend on maintaining adequate nutritional balance.

### **Dietary Recommendations for Following a Vegetarian Diet.**

The recommendations for a vegetarian diet are not that different from a typical diet. Based on the Food Guide Pyramid, recommended daily servings include:

Grains	6-11
Vegetables	3-5
Fruits	2-4
Dairy	2-3 (optional)
Milk, yogurt, cheese	
Protein	2-3
Beans, nuts, seeds, Meat substitutes	
Fats, oils and sweets	Use sparingly

Variety is important in a vegetarian diet to ensure a mixture of foods rich in necessary vitamins and minerals. The American Dietetic Association recommends that vegans should include a Vitamin B12 supplement in addition to Vitamin D if exposure to sun is limited. Following the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* that recommend a reduction in fat, cholesterol and an increased consumption of fruits, vegetables and grains, a well-planned and varied vegetarian diet can be a healthful step toward this goal.

While some individuals choose not to make a full-time commitment to becoming vegetarian, practicing a semi-vegetarian lifestyle can be a first step to improving one's diet and reducing risk of chronic disease. It is helpful to consult a Registered Dietitian when considering a change in diet.

#### *References:*

Johnston, PK, Messina, M, Messina, V, eds. *Loma Linda University Vegetarian Nutrition & Health Letter*. June/July 2000;3(6), June/July 2000.

Messina, VK, Burke, KI. Position of The American Dietetic Association: Vegetarian Diets. *Journal of the American Dietetic Association*. 1997;97(11):1317-1321.

*Nutrition and Your Health: Dietary Guidelines for Americans*. 4<sup>th</sup> ed. Washington, DC: US Department of Agriculture and US Department of Health and Human Services; 1995.

The Third International Congress on Vegetarianism. *The American Journal of Clinical Nutrition*. 1999; 70 (3):suppl.