

Kelly Dorfman

Should You Be A Vegetarian Or Meat Eater? Part I

Leaving the food co-op one sunny afternoon, I noticed a young woman struggling with a toddler. The little girl was attempting to climb a short retaining wall while the young woman watched and waved her hands. I could not tell if her actions were for encouragement or out of helplessness. Having never learned to “stay out of it” (despite years of coaching from my husband), I walked over to see if I could help.

The woman strained as if she were lifting a Volkswagen rather than a toddler and heaved the child the few feet to the top of the wall. The lip of the wall was level with a grassy patch where the child proceeded to poke happily in the dirt. I started a conversation with the woman who unsurprisingly turned out to be the toddler’s mother. She was a long time co-op member and committed vegetarian. After several minutes of bonding over the joys of co-op shopping, the woman confessed she felt very weak and had a hard time carrying her daughter. Her doctor declared her to be in perfect health but she was sure something was wrong.

I am a clinical nutritionist who specializes in difficult cases. People come to me for ideas after they have exhausted more traditional medical approaches. They regularly tell me the intimate details of their lives after a few minutes of acquaintance so this was not an unusual conversation for me. I described my background and settled in to listen to the details of her story. When she finished, I observed that in my experience some people are not constitutionally suited to vegetarianism. Her weakness could be a sign her body needed more concentrated proteins.

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Thankfully, the woman looked more stunned than offended. “But I eat an extremely healthy diet with plenty of organic fruits and vegetables,” she said in defense.

As I explained then and have been explaining ever since, some bodies do not thrive on even the highest quality vegetarian diet. A diet conscious vegetarian may consume sufficient protein from beans, cheese, eggs, nuts and seeds on top of buckets full of fruits and vegetables and still not feel peppy. This is confusing and sometimes shocking for people who have embarked on a meat-less diet for its health benefits. “I can’t believe I have to eat meat to feel well,” one woman complained to me recently. “It is contrary to everything I use to believe.”

To balance the scale, there are meat eaters who do not flourish on animal proteins. They may only eat the highest quality animals raised on organic grains by loving monks and still feel bloated and irritable. For them, dropping the meat and upping the vegetables improves their digestion and temperament. But which diet is right for you?

In theory, nutrition experts base their dietary recommendations on study results. When it comes to eating, the sum of the literature is about as clear as a bowl of borscht. As a result the advice you get will reflect what works best for the expert personally or which studies she favors. Some studies suggest vegetarians have a statistically lower risk of heart disease, cancer and diabetes. Ergo, if you are at risk for cancer, heart disease and diabetes (and who isn’t), it should follow the vegetarian diet is for you. The problem is the benefits accrued from a vegetarian diet may not come from avoiding meat.

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Vegetarians could have a lower incidence of disease because they tend to have other health enhancing habits and weigh less. Health conscious people exercise, eat their veggies, watch their weight, floss their teeth and maybe even think more happy thoughts than the non-health oriented. They are about half as likely to die compared to everyone else from any disease, period. In studies this effect is called a healthy-patient bias. When scientists try to gather data by simply observing how many people get better or worse doing this or that, too many health conscious types, like vegetarians, in one group will dramatically skew the results.

The heavier you are, the higher your risk to cancer, heart disease and diabetes. People who lose weight on a meat-based regimen or simply maintain their ideal weight are also at significantly lower risk to these diseases. One study linking meat eating to cancer found increased risk only when people ate processed meat like sausage and lunchmeat not steak and chicken. Preservatives used to make hot dogs and bacon are known carcinogens so added chemicals not the meat itself may be the killer.

Carnivores are more apt to quote a recent study that found vegetarians had a lower quality of life and generally poorer health compared to their meat-eating counterparts. The Austrian medical university study reported vegetarians were more physically active, drank less alcohol and weighed less but nonetheless had higher levels of impairment from disorders and suffered more from anxiety/depression and chronic diseases. The study's authors cited the lower nutrient levels in the vegetarian diet as the cause of the sensational results. Vegetarians cried "fowl" in response, or more

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precisely, “foul”. Just because two phenomena are associated does not mean one caused the other.

And therein lies the problem. Studies tend to be set up to observe if a medical problem is more or less associated with eating one kind of diet or a single food item. If you listen to enough of these confounding results you will throw your hands up in surrender and reach for a tub of ice cream. You are a unique person beyond any medical problem you may have. Experts agree most people would benefit by eating more fruits and vegetables but there are no studies exploring who should eat meat verses who should not. The time has come to stop judging diets as good or bad and get smart about who thrives on what.

Should You Be A Vegetarian Or Meat Eater? Part II to follow in September 2016.