

Should You Be A Vegetarian or Meat Eater?

Part II

The potential number of people struggling with the meat vs. vegetarian diet question is substantial. According to a *Vegetarian Times* study, 22.8 million people in the U.S. alone follow a mostly vegetarian diet or are vegetarian inclined. One million people are vegans. The main reason people said they were following a vegetarian diet was to improve overall health. Concerns over animal welfare was a close second.

I will concentrate on how the diet affects overall health, as there are no easy answers to animal welfare concerns. Breeding and sacrificing animals for food is not appealing to many of us. The cows and pigs cannot be too thrilled either. Obviously cows do not dream of being a rump roast at your dinner party. There is also an environmental impact if we want a chicken in every pot. Animal husbandry is hard on the environment and requires more resources than raising plants. Arguably, there are not enough resources to provide meat for all 9 billion people in the world. The world needs people who thrive on a vegetarian diet.

Consequently, when clients tell me they cannot bear the idea of eating any animal, I do not try to change their minds though in some cases I explain avoiding meat may not be in their individual best health interest. Like it or not, humans are omnivores. Our teeth and digestive systems are designed to process both plants and meat. And there are no vegan sources of the essential nutrient, vitamin B12. While many people thrive as vegetarians, the concentrated nutrients provided by animal flesh are necessary for others to flourish. Nobody is less happy about this troubling fact than I am.

Learning The Hard Way

Years ago as a newly minted nutritionist, I decided to become a vegetarian. I was and remain an environmentalist and wanted to walk lightly upon the earth, not squander its limited resources. Cows and chickens were other beings, too, I reasoned. They should not be sacrificed for my own selfish survival needs.

Even eating animal by-products like cheese and eggs seemed ill-advised. Why exploit animals even for their by-products? Whole grains, beans, nuts, seeds, fruits and vegetables had been proven to contain the nutrients necessary to sustain life so I would be a vegan. For good measure, I avoided sugar, the white poison, too.

Had Steve Jobs been famous by then I may have decided to become a fruitarian. The fruitarian diet is a sparse affair composed of only fruit and sometimes seeds. Given my level of idealism and fervor, I might have refused to eat any plant that had not freely thrown itself on the ground to be gathered. I read “The Secret Life of Plants,” a book released in the 1970s and knew plants also suffered when they were pulled apart.

Thank goodness I got married and changed my name so anyone I knew at the time will not remember me. I was an extremely annoying but committed dietary zealot. The first week on my plant-only diet, I told anyone who would listen about the wonders of clean, animal-free eating. By the second week, I was not feeling very spunky. Dragging myself in and out of bed, my thinking was alarmingly fuzzy. The diet needed an adjustment and soon. I made sure to have nut or bean protein sources with every meal

and increased my fat intake. Instead of improving, a week later my hair started falling out.

Desperate, I decided regular vegetarianism would be pristine enough and added back cheese and eggs to get my protein intake up. When I became anemic, I swallowed iron pills and started counting the hairs in the sink after bathing. I could have knitted a cap with all the hair I was losing; a cap I would need soon if the situation did not change. The hair I had left was looking dull and limp so I decided fish had small brains and were being eaten by bigger fish anyway, and added them back.

If only fillet of fish had worked. Exhausted, I dreamt of steak. For me, it was a dark night of the soul. How could I be a spiritual, kind person and eat another animal? I consulted a trusted vegetarian friend. "Tibetan monks sometimes eat yak," she told me, choosing to ignore my lack of moral fiber. I did some research and discovered she was correct. There were many cultures, including Native Americans that lived in balance with nature while consuming animals.

My energy and hair growth returned only after I added red meat back to my diet. To this day, when somebody announces he is a vegetarian I longingly wish I could say the same but have grudgingly accepted I need to eat meat to be healthy. I tell myself the situation has made me a less judgmental person and more flexible nutritionist. Clearly the best diet for one person can be an insufficient disaster for the next. What you need to eat to be healthy may have nothing to do with your philosophical leanings or taste preferences.

The Birds and the Beets

At the time I had no idea why I had failed so spectacularly as a vegetarian. Over time, I have discovered the body clues that determine who needs heavier animal proteins and who can thrive on plants. The secrets are revealed by your body configuration, energy levels and digestive abilities. Most people know a little about how to read body language. If a friend crosses his arms over his chest during a conversation, for example, you might suspect he is less open to what you are saying. But few people understand how their own body broadcasts its dietary needs beyond the stomach growling for food.

All of the tendencies I will describe are on a continuum. If you have some of the characteristics or only mild versions, you could remain vegetarian inclined and still thrive. But before I explain the three key areas of concern, let's talk about the basic nutrient differences between plant and animal based foods.

Remember how you learned about photosynthesis in fourth or fifth grade? Kids today are probably memorizing plant biodynamics in pre-school but most of us learned at some point about the basic process of how plants use the energy from the sun to change carbon dioxide (carbon and oxygen) and water (hydrogen and oxygen) into starches and sugar. The starches and sugar are the plant's food but they become our starches and sugars when we eat carrots and hummus for lunch.

Sun and water are critical to a plant's growth but they also need many of the same minerals we do. They absorb calcium, magnesium, zinc, iron, manganese, molybdenum, copper and boron, to name a few from the soil. Consequently, plants

contain these nutrients, too. Eating plants transfers their nutrients into the flesh and bones of the consuming animal.

Experts estimate a steer needs to consume five to 20 pounds of grain to create one pound of meat. The exact ratio is debatable but everyone agrees many pounds of plants are required to produce a pound of edible meat. Animals concentrate the energizing nutrients and minerals in their flesh. (See Box 2.) The nutrients are not distributed evenly. Calcium collects in the bones, for example, so a hamburger will not contain much unless the butcher tossed a few femurs into the grinder. Vitamin A collects in the liver and other organs rarely consumed in modern times by people who are not contestants on Fear Factor or possibly French. The thymus, brain, heart, eyes and testicles all concentrate nutrients at a higher level than the muscles. Oddly, we no longer eat the most nutrient dense parts of animals.

All vitamins and minerals work like computer software. Software becomes enmeshed with the hardware and makes the machine functional. The nutrients regulate and assist the body in the same way. Vitamin A modulates immune function and the repair and growth of your skin and epithelial cells. It is also incorporated into the rods and cones in your eyes so you can see. Without vitamin A, you have eyes that cannot see and skin that will not repair.

Plants use nutrients in similar ways but do not accumulate vitamins involved with energy production (like the B vitamins), minerals and protein as intensely as animals do. What they excel at accumulating is nutrients involved with keeping pests away. Substances that protect them from bugs and disease help us detoxify poisons, reduce

inflammation and bolster immunity. These are anti-oxidants like vitamins A and C and other even more potent plant nutrients called phytonutrients.

Nutrition experts are enamored by blueberries and the other brightly colored fruits and vegetables because different colors in plants are associated with powerful phytonutrients. The blue in blueberries, for example, contain phytonutrients called polyphenols. Polyphenols reduce inflammation and can even change the way your genes operate. In studies, blueberry polyphenols improve cognition and prevent age related declines in memory and motor function. The plants themselves do not have a higher IQ but use the polyphenols in their pest defense system.

All fruits and vegetables contain exciting phytonutrients. Most have names only a masochistic linguist would love. Broccoli and other cruciferous vegetables contain a phytonutrient called sulforaphane that protects DNA and is now believed to zap breast cancer cells. Watercress contains the phytonutrient isothiocyanate to help the liver clean up molecular ruffians and poisons. Even the humblest turnip is loaded with the impressive sounding glucosinolates.

Animal based foods contain almost none of these cancer preventing, anti-inflammation nutrients while plants have a wide and abundant variety of them.

In the broadest terms, animal foods excel at building muscles and as concentrated energy sources and plants are best at protecting against environmental assaults, repairing damage and preventing disease. Obviously, everyone needs both energy and disease protection but how you process food to get energy determines how much animal based food needs to be included in your dietary repertoire.

Should You Be A Vegetarian Or Meat Eater? Part III to follow in October 2016.