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Transition from vegetarian to eating meat? ^[1]

Dear Alice,

I have been a lacto-ovo vegetarian for three years now. I want to stop and get back to eating meat. I do not know the proper way of doing this, so I would love feedback on how to plan my meals.

Thank you,
J

Answer

Dear J,

Rejoining the ranks of the omnivorous doesn't mean you're required to make major shifts in your current vegetarian diet, as long as your current diet provides the nutrients your body needs. Most recommendations about transitioning from a vegetarian diet to one that includes meat suggest slowly adding in easy-to-digest, lean meats, while continuing to eat vegetarian staples.

Making thoughtful choices about the types of meats to add to your meal plan may be a place to start. Fish, including salmon, trout, herring, and sardines (in general, cold-water fish with small bones), can be a great source of protein as well as omega-3 fatty acids. Lean meats, such as poultry (preferably white meat and skinless), lean cuts of beef and pork, and ground meats with the least percentage of fat, are also good sources of protein and iron. Health care providers recommend that these meats be at least 90 percent lean, and the American Heart Association suggests ^[2] choosing fish and poultry over red meat. However, if you do want to eat red meat, the AHA recommends up to one serving of 2.5 ounces (or 70 grams) daily. As you start to eat meat, it may be helpful to begin with fish and leaner cuts of meat, as fat is harder to break down. You may want to incorporate meat gradually and note how it makes you feel, rather than doing so in every meal. If one of your reasons for going vegetarian was due to animal welfare, you could try to learn more about the living conditions of the animals and the farming practices of the supplier before making a purchase.

Like any meat-eater, you might want to use caution when considering processed meats such as ham, sausage, hot dogs, and packaged lunch meats, as they're often loaded with preservatives

and sodium. Turkey, roast beef, and low-fat varieties of luncheon meats tend to have less fat than bologna or salami. Keep in mind that processed meats are a significant contributor to colorectal, pancreatic, and prostate cancers. Research has shown that women who ate more than 20 grams of processed meats daily had a higher risk of breast cancer. In fact, processed meat is considered a carcinogen to humans if consumed in large enough amounts. Also remember that with the addition of meat to your diet comes increased cholesterol and saturated fat, which can raise blood cholesterol levels and increase the potential for cardiovascular disease.

Grains, beans, nuts, seeds, fruits, and vegetables are still an essential part of a healthy diet and are all meaningful sources of vitamins, minerals, fibers, proteins, and enzymes. You mentioned that you're a lacto-ovo vegetarian, which means you've been eating eggs and dairy. These animal products are great sources of protein and other nutrients and can remain a beneficial component of your diet, along with everything else. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) considers fish, meat, legumes, and beans as part of the same food group. The recommended daily amount to eat from this group depends on age, sex, and level of physical activity; however, typically a serving from the protein group is three to four ounces (or equivalent to a deck of cards).

Making the change to an omnivorous diet slowly, with continued use of the vegetarian foods you're accustomed to eating, may help avoid causing discomfort with a sudden onslaught of new foods. If you're looking for more specific information, consider making an appointment with a registered dietitian, who may be able to help you with your dietary needs. If you're unsure where to find one, you can speak with your health care provider. Enjoy the array of options you have in meal planning and restaurant choices, and don't forget to eat your vegetables, even in the midst of meat-eating bliss!

Alice!

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