Pros and cons of vegetarianism

Dear Alice,

What are some good and bad things about becoming a vegetarian?

Answer

Dear Reader,

Holy shitake! There’s a ton of information (and misinformation) about vegetarian diets out there. It’s a great idea to learn about and weigh the pros and cons before making any major dietary change. Avoiding meat may offer some health benefits, as well as address some commonly held environmental and ethical concerns. That said, going veg comes with some potential nutritional and logistical challenges that you may want to be prepare for in order to stay healthy on a vegetarian diet (if that’s the direction you choose). The following list describes various benefits of vegetarianism:

- **Plant foods are abundant in nutrients, including vitamins, minerals, and protein.** They also contain phytochemicals — plant chemicals that may help protect against disease. Phytochemicals are what give fruits and vegetables their distinct color, smell, and taste. Some examples include beta-carotene (found in some orange veggies such as carrots and sweet potatoes) and lycopene (found in tomatoes). Nutritional experts recommend eating a variety of colors of fruits and vegetables to help increase the possible health benefits of different phytochemicals.

- **Potential health benefits.** Research is still inconclusive on how vegetarianism impacts health, but there are some promising trends. Vegetarians generally have less saturated fat and cholesterol in their diets and are more likely to have lower low-density lipoprotein (LDL) cholesterol, body mass index (BMI), and blood pressure. Not consuming red meat is associated with lower rates of colon cancer and type 2 diabetes. One caveat — there’s nothing automatically healthy about a vegetarian diet. A vegetarian could be adhering to a strict diet of French fries and mozzarella sticks every day and still be a vegetarian, which would be lacking in a balance of nutrients. A well-rounded, nutritious diet is key for overall health, meat or no meat (more on that later!).

- **Live out your beliefs.** If you have an aim to respect animals, lessen your carbon footprint on the environment, or just want to make a lifestyle change, you might find that
vegetarianism is a way to take action toward making a change that’s meaningful to you. Whenever you cut a food group out of your diet, it’s a good idea to understand how to replace the vital nutrients that go along with it. Some challenges of being a vegetarian:

- **It can be harder to get the protein you need.** Protein is critical for maintaining and repairing bones, muscles, and other organs. Fortunately, there are plenty of non-meat protein options such as eggs, dairy, lentils, beans, nuts, and whole grains.
- **Other nutritional deficiencies can develop without a balanced eating plan in place.** Cutting out meat, fish, and poultry might reduce your intake of vitamin B12, omega-3 fatty acids, iron, and other necessary nutrients. Eggs, dairy, various vegetables, fortified foods, and supplements can help make up the difference. Mayo Clinic [2] has some helpful guidelines for building a well-rounded vegetarian eating plan.
- **Depending on where you live, it may be challenging to adhere to a meat-free lifestyle.** For example, living in a big city may provide you with endless veggie options when dining out, while locations with limited food choices or a meat-heavy culture may make it more difficult to find substitutions for meat.
- **You may have difficulty explaining your eating habits to family and friends.** While it may seem that being a vegetarian is relatively mainstream, certain cultures and cuisines have fewer herbivore-friendly dishes. You may encounter some sticky situations where people have prepared for you a meaty meal, or perhaps, your friends and family may challenge your decision to remain meat-free.

Ultimately, what matters most is a balanced eating plan full of nutrient-rich foods. When selecting a healthy eating plan appropriate for your state of health, age, activity level, preferences, and values, a registered dietitian could be a helpful resource. Remember, it’s okay for your relationship with food to evolve over time — here’s to a healthy and tasty journey!

Alice!

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Related questions

- Where can I find easy vegetarian recipes? [6]
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- Cooking for partners with different nutritional needs [8]

Resources

- Columbia Health Nutrition Services (Morningside) [9]
- Student Health Service Nutrition Services (CUIMC) [10]

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