



veganism



Vegan queso dip, with cashew and potato nacho sauce, soy-lentil chorizo, spring onions, tomatoes, black beans and chillies.

what is it?

The Vegan Society defines veganism as 'a way of living which seeks to avoid, as far as possible and practicable, all forms of exploitation of, and cruelty to, animals for food, clothing or any other purpose.' In addition to abstaining from meat, fish, dairy, eggs and honey, vegans do not wear animal-derived clothing, such as leather or wool, or use cosmetics and other products tested on animals (apart from medicines). Vegans also don't participate in activities which feature animals, such as zoos, circuses and horse racing.

Vegans believe that animals are sentient beings with feelings and individual personalities, just like humans, and that they have the same rights to life and freedom. For some, religious beliefs, health and the environment may also be a factor in the decision to switch to a plant-based diet. Vegan diets are varied, from haute cuisine to junk food.

The term 'vegan' was coined by founding members of the Vegan Society in 1944, using the first and last two letters of 'vegetarian', the movement veganism grew out of. The concept of veganism began to take hold in the 19th century in the UK when Dr William Lambe and Percy Bysshe Shelley publicly objected to eating eggs and dairy on ethical grounds.

Today, veganism is growing fast and becoming more mainstream. The Vegan Society estimates there could now be as many as 300,000 vegans in the UK alone. Certain countries have seen a surge in people adopting a plant-based diet for health reasons, and positive media coverage has played a part in that. Negative perceptions have been challenged by a number of high-profile, successful vegans (actors like Woody Harrelson and Jared Leto, and athletes like Carl Lewis and the Williams sisters).

what are the benefits?

Animal welfare: the arguments are the same as for vegetarianism, but include dairy, eggs, fibres etc. In corporate, industrial agriculture, dairy cows are prone to infections due to over-milking, and are kept in an unnatural cycle of artificial insemination and birth to stimulate milk production. Calves are taken away soon after birth, since the milk is required for human consumption. Laying hens and dairy cows are slaughtered in their prime or disposed of once they're no longer productive. The average life span of a dairy cow is four years, compared to its natural 20. Male animals (chicks, calves) are surplus to requirements and are killed immediately (chicks may be minced for pet food) or live short, unnatural lives (veal calves).

Environment: the UN states that the meat industry is 'one of the top contributors to environmental problems, at every scale from local to global.' In addition to CO₂ released from forest clearing, cows and sheep produce 37% of human-related methane and 65% of nitrous oxide, mostly from manure. Roughly a fifth of the world's land has been degraded by overgrazing, and agriculture is responsible for 80% of global deforestation, with grazing and feed production taking up most of the world's agricultural land. It takes, on average, 4.5kg of grain to make 1kg of chicken meat. Also, it's estimated to require, on average, 1,000 litres of water to produce 1 litre of milk, and 15,000 litres for 1kg of beef, vs. 300 litres for 1kg of potatoes. Growing feed crops for livestock consumes 56% of water in the US alone. It follows that less meat eaten means less land required to feed a given number of people, so there would be more land available for nature. (although land used for livestock does tend to be more marginal, less suitable for growing crops). Many global fisheries are also known to be overexploited, with depleted stocks. Overfishing



The dairy industry has no use for male calves, many of which end up in veal crates - unable to exercise, which would toughen their meat.



Vegetable or fruit smoothies are very popular – this one is strawberry, pomegranate, banana and kiwi.

and by-catch (species such as dolphins, that are not the intended catch) are factors in the decline in numbers of marine species.

The environmental costs of leather production are also high: much leather marketed as Italian actually comes from ranches in the Amazon, some on illegally cleared land. Tanning is a highly toxic process, damaging health and polluting waterways and soil in developing countries to which production is often outsourced.

However, the purely environmental arguments for and against animal products are complicated. Eating eggs from free-range chickens on a mixed smallholding, line-caught fish or lamb from the Welsh hills may well be more sustainable than drinking soy milk from GM plants grown using pesticides on the other side of the world on land that was previously rainforest. From a purely environmental perspective, we need to look at foodstuffs on a case-by-case basis. Having said that, the sheer amount of meat eaten today means that a lot of it has to come from large-scale, industrial livestock farming, and so overall, it would be a good thing if humanity consumed less meat – and becoming vegan can help with that.

Human health: vegans tend to score better in terms of heart disease, blood pressure, type 2 diabetes, obesity, certain cancers and arthritis, among other conditions. They also tend to have lower cholesterol and lower body mass index than any other dietary group. Health benefits to the individual can have a knock-on effect for society as less strain is placed on health services.

what can I do?

A wealth of information and recipes can be found online, and vegan cookbooks are increasingly available. If you're a new vegan, it's important that your diet is appetising enough to keep you motivated. Look at the food you already enjoy; is it vegan or could you substitute any ingredients to make it so? Lots of Asian food and other international cuisine is animal-free and nutritionally well-balanced so can be a good place to start. Beware of using unhealthy amounts of things like salt to make up for flavours you're used to. Experiment with new ingredients, spices and contrasts of colours, flavours and textures. Nuts and pulses are a great source of protein and fat. Combining grains and pulses (beans on toast, dhal and rice) can help provide all essential amino acids. Properly informed, it's easy to cook vegan. Eating out may be harder, but restaurants are increasingly offering vegan options in response to consumer demand. Things may be harder in cultures where meat and dairy form the cornerstone of the traditional diet.

The Vegan Society reports applications for their vegan trademark have hit an unprecedented high, roughly doubling in 2015. Some 18,000 products, from food to cosmetics, now carry the trademark. Vegan food needn't be more expensive than meat (which is produced extremely cheaply these days). In fact, a recent poll of students in the UK showed 18% of them were considering going vegan to save money while studying.

A vegan diet should follow the same rules as any other in terms of fruit and veg, carbohydrates and protein. Nutrition is especially important during pregnancy, or for children and the elderly.

You could start by trying non-dairy milks, meat alternatives, trying vegan recipes or eating in vegan restaurants to see what works for you.

resources

- lowimpact.org/veganism for info, courses, links, books, including:
- Moskowitz & Romero, *Veganomicon: the ultimate vegan cookbook*
- Davis & Melina, *Becoming Vegan*
- vegansociety.com - Vegan Society
- barefootvegan.com - free digital magazine
- ivu.org/recipes/index.html - recipes from around the world

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