



vegetarianism



what is it?

According to the Vegetarian Society, a vegetarian is "someone who lives on a diet of grains, pulses, nuts, seeds, vegetables and fruits with, or without, the use of dairy products and eggs. A vegetarian does not eat any meat, poultry, game, fish, shellfish or by-products of slaughter." Lacto-ovo vegetarians, who eat dairy products and eggs, are the most common kind, while lacto-vegetarians eat dairy but not eggs. Vegans don't eat, use or wear any animal-tested or derived product. People who eat fish but avoid red or white meat are sometimes referred to as vegetarians but the correct term is actually 'pescatarian'.

People in certain cultures have been vegetarian for thousands of years, and there is evidence that some ancient cultures also abstained from meat. In more modern times, however, the 'vegetable diet' first began to gain favour in Britain in the early 19th century, around the time of the temperance movement and widespread social reform that attempted to address the problems faced by a newly industrialised Victorian society. Eating flesh was seen in certain circles as unnatural and a potential cause of aggression, while a plant-based diet was believed to be beneficial for health. The earliest recorded use of the term 'vegetarian' in print was in *The Healthian* journal in 1842, and the Vegetarian Society was established in Manchester in 1847. Notable adherents of the movement in the early years of the 20th century included George Bernard Shaw and Mohandas 'Mahatma' Ghandi.

Since those early beginnings, vegetarianism has grown in popularity in Western societies and today, while vegetarians are still a minority, their lifestyle choices are generally accepted in many countries (if not always fully understood by some).



Bombay dosa with chickpea sauce. For this and other recipes see vegsoc.org.

what are the benefits?

Human health: research shows vegetarians tend to have lower rates of obesity, heart disease, cholesterol and blood pressure, meaning also less strain on health services.

Animal welfare: most intensively-farmed animals are slaughtered in their prime or disposed of once past their best (laying hens, dairy cows). Male animals (chicks, calves) are usually surplus to requirements and are killed immediately (chicks minced for pet food) or live short, unnatural lives (veal calves). Others may spend their entire lives in cramped spaces and/or without natural light. When slaughtered, animals can be insufficiently stunned and still able to feel pain and fear as they are slaughtered. Exposés of factory farm and slaughterhouse practices have sometimes revealed high levels of cruelty. Vegetarians consider this level of suffering unjustifiable and prefer to opt out of the system.

Environmental: industrial livestock farming takes up the lion's share of the world's agricultural land (for grazing and feed grain), and more is required every year to keep up with demand. Clear-cutting in the Amazon to create new pastures equates to 70% of the total deforestation in Latin America. A typical meat eater's diet requires up to 2.5 times more land than a vegetarian's (although it tends to be more marginal land). With grain-fed animals, it takes on average 7kg of grain to produce 1kg of beef, and 4kg of grain to produce 1kg of pork. Livestock rearing is also a highly water-intensive process: an estimated 13,000 to 100,000 litres of water is required to produce 1kg of beef, versus 1,000-2,000 litres per kilo of wheat. 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. Lowimpact.org supports organic smallholding, including those with livestock – but we support vegetarianism because it can mean less meat consumed overall. Farmed animals are responsible for c. 20% of human-related greenhouse gas emissions. CO₂ is released when forests are cleared, cows and sheep produce 37% of human-related methane gas, and 65% of human-generated nitrous oxide comes from livestock farming, mostly from manure. Both methane and nitrous oxide have a far greater impact on global warming than CO₂. In the oceans, many global fisheries are known to be overexploited and with depleted stocks. Overfishing and by-catch (killing species that are not the intended catch, such as dolphin) are just two of a number of factors responsible for a decline in the number of marine species in certain parts of the world.



what can I do?

Find recipes online and vegetarian cookbooks in bookstores / online. A lot of international cuisine, especially Asian, is already animal-free and nutritionally well-balanced. Otherwise you can try veggie burgers or sausages as a meat replacement. When shopping, look out for the Vegetarian Society accreditation label which offers a guarantee that a product is animal-free.

Beware of using unhealthy amounts of things like salt or cheese to make up for the meat flavour you're used to. Get to know your spice rack and experiment with new ingredients. Nuts and pulses are a good source of protein and fat. Grains and pulses can be combined, either in one meal or throughout the day, to provide all the essential amino acids. Many food combinations seem to have evolved with this in mind: beans on toast, red beans and rice or dhal and bread or rice.

Most restaurants in the UK and US offer at least one vegetarian option, and vegetarian restaurants can be found in most large towns and cities. Things may be harder in other cultures and you may need to be quite firm or decide to be flexible. Vegetarian food can be cost-effective but is not necessarily cheaper than meat - often produced very cheaply these days. Vegetarian sausages are often as expensive as meat ones. The cost will depend on where you shop: health food shops have lots of vegetarian alternatives but they can be pricey if doing the weekly shop there.

Being vegetarian doesn't guarantee a healthy diet (a chip butty is vegetarian, for example). However, omnivores can just as easily lack vitamins and minerals. People are sometimes advised to eat meat by their doctor, which the Vegetarian Society



The easiest way to make sure you're not contributing to cruel, intensive animal farming is to not eat meat.



The 3 main parts of a vegetarian diet: fruit & veg; grains, bread & carbohydrates; and the rest - pulses, nuts, eggs, dairy, spices etc.

believes is often due to a lack of understanding of nutrition on the part of the doctor rather than any evidence that a plant-based diet is unhealthy. A vegetarian diet should follow the same rules as any other: five portions of fruit and veg a day, plus carbohydrate or starchy foods, and protein (pulses, eggs, nuts, dairy etc.). It's especially important to plan for good nutrition during pregnancy, or with children or the elderly.

Vegetarians are still a minority group and may be the target of jokes or teasing - notably when meat is the focus (barbecues, Christmas, etc.). Parents of vegetarian children should be especially aware of this. Vegetarians may need thick skin (or go on vegetarian forums to get ideas for witty ripostes or myth-busting). But in the US and some European countries, most people these days know at least one vegetarian and attitudes have changed a lot.

resources

- lowimpact.org/vegetarianism for more info, courses, links, products, books, including:
- Julia Ponsonby, *Gaia's Kitchen*
- Julie Sahni, *Classic Indian Vegetarian Cookery*
- *The Vegetarian Student Cookbook*
- Jonathan Safran Foer, *Eating Animals*
- happycow.net – world guide to veggie restaurants and food stores
- vegsoc.org – the Vegetarian Society
- thematix.com – video about factory farming
- vegweb.com – huge collection of recipes

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