Green Cuisine Basics

If you'd like to try a vegetarian diet, nature's bountiful summer season may be the best time to go meatless. But first learn what's so cool about this healthier way of eating.

May 25, 2010 By Gerrie E. Summers

In what is essentially still a meat-and-potatoes nation, eating vegetarian raises questions in many people's minds. What qualifies as vegetarian? What about getting the proper nutrients? And is this diet really healthier for you?

For those who want to exclude meat from their diets or limit the quantity of animal flesh they consume, a meatless diet has recognized benefits. Vegetarians tend to have a lower body mass index (BMI, a measure of a person's height to weight ratio), lower levels of "bad" LDL cholesterol and lower blood pressure. There's also evidence that vegetarians have fewer incidences of heart disease, hypertension, type 2 diabetes, osteoporosis and, under certain conditions, dementia (the loss of mental function caused by degenerative diseases such as Alzheimer's), chronic drug use, depression and a few other illnesses.

"Eating vegetarian—especially vegan—is one of the healthiest ways you can eat," says former omnivore nutritionist Tracye Lynn McQuirter, MPH, author of *By Any Greens Necessary: A Revolutionary Guide for Black Women Who Want to Eat Great, Get Healthy, Lose Weight, and Look Phat.*

"The other very crucial benefit of eating vegetarian foods is that it's one of the fastest ways to end global warming," she suggests. "The United Nations recently issued a report stating that raising livestock transmits more global warming emissions than all of the transportation sector worldwide. So what you eat not only improves your health, it can save the planet. And it can save the lives of billions of innocent animals every year."

McQuirter is a vegan (pronounced vee-gun). This means she does not eat meat, poultry, fish or any products derived from animals, including eggs, dairy products, honey and gelatin. It also means McQuirter may be less likely to die from heart disease, the No. 1 cause of death in the United States, as compared with red meat eaters who fire up their risk with each sizzling steak they snatch off the barbie.

Unlike meat, plant-based foods contain no harmful cholesterol and very little, if any, saturated fat, both of which clog the arteries and lead to heart disease, stroke and other chronic diseases. "And

meat has no fiber," McQuirter adds. "Fiber is only found in plant-based foods and is an essential nutrient needed for your body to properly digest and receive nourishment from food."

VEGETARIAN DIVERSITY

"Vegetarian" is a general term used to describe people who do not eat animals, such as cows, pigs, chickens, ducks, turkeys and goats. But McQuirter extends that menu to also include fish.

Although she is a strict vegetarian, McQuirter knows that people with a variety of different dietary regimens claim the name.

Fruitarians eat fruit, nuts and seeds that fall naturally from a tree or plant (meaning that the food is harvested in a way that doesn't kill the plant).

Lacto-ovo vegetarians consume the milk and eggs of animals and also the products made from milk and eggs, but they do not eat meat, poultry or fish.
Lacto vegetarians drink the milk of animals and eat dairy products, but no meat, poultry, fish or eggs.

Ovo vegetarians eat the eggs of animals, but no meat, poultry, fish or dairy products.

Raw or live foodists eat fruits, vegetables, grains, seeds and nuts that are not cooked but may be sprouted, fermented or dehydrated.

Partial vegetarians avoid red meat, but may eat fish or poultry.

Vegans eat only vegetables, grains, fruits, nuts and seeds. In addition, ethical vegans do not wear clothes made from animals, including wool, leather, fur and silk.

NUTRITION FOR VEGETARIANS

If you are concerned that a veggie diet will not provide enough nutrients, "plant-based foods have all the fiber, complex carbohydrates, protein, calcium, iron and other nutrients your body needs every day," McQuirter says.

"Also, adopting a healthy vegetarian lifestyle offers children a better chance of avoiding obesity, preventing heart disease and curbing the onset of type 2 diabetes," she adds.

McQuirter observes that these life-threatening formerly "adult diseases" are now plaguing our children at alarming rates.

"In fact, this is the first generation of children who may have shorter life spans than their parents," she says, echoing a report published in *The New England Journal of Medicine* several years ago about life expectancy forecasts for the 21st century.

In terms of the nutritional value of a veggie diet, the American Dietetic Association (ADA) basically

supports McQuirter's claims. It recommends that, if necessary, vegetarians get additional amounts of important nutrients, such as the ones below, from supplements or fortified foods.

Calcium. Depending on the type of vegetarian diet you follow, calcium intake may be affected. Lacto-ovo vegetarians get as much calcium as meateaters, but vegans don't. Soybeans, some legumes and greens such as spinach, kale and broccoli are good sources of calcium from plants, but vegans can meet requirements with fortified foods and supplements.

Iron. Vegetarians have a greater risk of iron deficiency, since the richest source of iron is red meat, liver and eggs, but these are also high in cholesterol. Plant sources of iron can be found in dried beans, spinach, enriched products, brewer's yeast and dried fruits. Including vitamin C sources (citrus fruits, orange juice, tomatoes) at each meal will increase iron absorption.

Protein. Plant proteins can provide enough essential and nonessential amino acids, found in whole grains, legumes, vegetables, seeds and nuts. And soy protein is proven as equal to proteins of animal origin.

Vitamin B-12. Vegans need a reliable source of B-12, which can be found in some fortified cereals, fortified soy beverages, brewer's yeast and other foods. "A concern about B-12 is often raised, but meat eaters and vegetarians alike should take a multivitamin to get the small amount of B-12 needed in the diet, which originates from bacteria, not animals," McQuirter says.

Vitamin D. Vegans also need a reliable source of vitamin D. Those who don't get enough sun should check with their docs about supplements.

Zinc. This mineral is needed for growth and development in children. Good plant sources are grains, nuts and legumes. For those who consume seafood, a great source of zinc is shellfish.

The American Heart Association also offers these general healthy eating recommendations:

- Eat a wide variety of foods and enough calories to meet your energy needs.
- Keep your intake of sweets and fatty foods to a minimum.
- Choose whole and unrefined grains, and use fortified cereal products.
- Choose a variety of fruits and vegetables. They are good sources of vitamins A and C.
- If you consume milk or dairy products, choose fat-free, non-fat and low-fat varieties.
- Limit the number of eggs you eat. One large egg has about 213 milligrams of cholesterol. Docs advise keeping daily cholesterol intake to no more than 300 milligrams.

In general, when you're ready to switch to a vegetarian diet, it's best to consult a qualified dietitian or nutrition professional if you need help with meal planning, especially during growth

periods, pregnancy, breast-feeding and recovery from illness. (To get started, check out the food pyramid at vegetariannutrition.org and a vegan food pyramid at chooseveg.com.)

HOW TO TRANSITION TO A VEGETARIAN DIET
McQuirter suggests that we first “demystify vegetarian foods by looking at the plant-based foods we already eat.”

Fruits, vegetables, rice and pasta are vegetarian foods, she says. If you begin to miss burgers and chicken wings, then try soy-based products that are made to resemble or taste like meat and dairy products. These are not the healthiest of soy products since they are processed, McQuirter explains, but they can be used to transition from familiar foods to plant foods.

Another tip is to gradually eliminate the amount of animal and animal products over a three- to six-month period by adding more fruits, vegetables and whole grains. Build meals around vegetables and try to go meatless at least one day a week, McQuirter advises.

“There’s a great website that helps thousands of people do this already. It’s called meatlessmondays.com,” McQuirter says. “It’s hosted by Johns Hopkins University and offers online support, recipes, resources and motivation to help people go meatless at least once a week. You can also find thousands of great vegetarian recipes online, or in vegetarian cookbooks from the library or bookstores.”

McQuirter also suggests people have a girls’ or guys’ night out and go to a local vegetarian restaurant to sample lots of vegetarian dishes at once and have fun at the same time. She also advises you take vegetarian cooking classes, join a local vegetarian society “and attend events with folks just like you who are curious about or new to vegetarian foods.”

By Any Greens Necessary has an entire chapter about how to transition to vegan foods. Also, consult the free vegetarian starter guides available from pcrm.org, cok.net, vrg.org and peta.org.

But the most important element is to enjoy the transition. As McQuirter concludes: “See it not as a chore, but as a positive step toward reaching your health goals.”

Broccoli Ginger Cashew Stir-Fry
This stir-fry recipe is from Tracye Lynn McQuirter’s new book, By Any Greens Necessary. “It’s perfect over brown rice or noodles,” says the author. “The key to this dish is not to overcook the broccoli. I prefer mine slightly wilted, but still crisp and bright green.”

3 tablespoons sesame oil
1 medium red onion, chopped
2 cloves garlic, peeled and chopped
1 tablespoon minced fresh ginger
1 red bell pepper, cored, seeded and chopped
1 head broccoli, chopped (florets only)

¼ cup cashew pieces
1 tablespoon Bragg Liquid Aminos (or other brand of natural soy sauce)
A dash of cayenne pepper
1 tablespoon Thai curry paste (optional)

Heat the sesame oil in a skillet or wok. Add the onion, garlic, ginger and red pepper then sauté until soft. Remove these vegetables from the oil and set aside. Using the same oil, turn up the heat and add the broccoli to the hot oil. Stir-fry for about 10 minutes. Reduce heat, add the vegetables back in and put in the remaining ingredients. Stir and let sit covered on low heat for another 5 minutes. Serve over brown rice or whole grain pasta. (My favorite is Ancient Harvest pasta, made with quinoa and corn flour.)

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