

Welcome to the plant-based diners club

by
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“But pills aren’t natural.”

“I had to stop being a veghead. I was always hungry!”

Ah, the cry of the budding naturalist gone vegan.

Two of the most consistent issues I hear from clients or folks I meet is: “Do I really need to take supplements? I mean, really, can’t I get everything from my food? There were no pharmaceutical companies in the caveman days, and they lived.” Then there is: “I felt great for the first week or so. Then, I got so weak. Then, I got sick.”

I don’t know. Are these folks just in need of some education or just annoying?

Okay, they are partially right. The billion dollar supplement industry did not exist during the Neolithic era. But neither did global climate change, cars, toxic clean up sites or fast food. The world has changed. Our air and water has changed. Soil is barely soil in many places. So, you just have to deal with the fact that you are in the 21st century.

As a new member of the plant-base diners club, you need to realize a few things about the path you are on. The foods are great. They don’t harm any living creature by ingesting them. You can show your children how to grow or process everything you now eat.

If you didn’t already know, you practically need special dispensation from the pope and sign away every right to discuss your job when you work on a kill floor of a meat packing facility. And, really, who wants to look at that?

However, you need to remember that these new foods you are consuming at a higher level do not work the same as the old animal products. The chemical make up is different. Your digestion will be different. But different can be a really good thing.

Here are a couple of pointers to get you started.

First, the supplement thing. When you are eating an animal based diet you are usually low in fiber, folate and vitamin C. You are high in proteins and vitamin B12. When you pet the animals and don't chew them, your B12 level drops and you are usually high in fiber, folate and vitamin C. Why the drop in B12? Because there are no reliable plant sources of B12. Why should you care?

Jack Norris, RD has the most detailed site on B12 deficiency.ⁱ He refers to it as his epic novel. I am finishing *Les Miserables*. Jack's treatise is shorter, more scientific and has no police chases. However, like *Les Mis* it is full of interesting detail and will help you understand a very complex event. He details the consequences of low B12 as fatigue, pernicious anemia, numbness of hands and feet, loss of menses, paranoia, diarrhea, impotence, infertility, sore tongue, and the list continues. Some studies strongly suggest or blatantly suggest a link between low B12 levels with cancer and depression. The evidence is strong between low B12 and stroke.

The most comprehensive study on vegetarians and vegans ever is the EPIC study.ⁱⁱ

"European Prospective Investigation into Cancer and Nutrition) was initiated in 1992 and is the largest detailed study of diet and health ever undertaken. It involves over 500,000 people in 10 European countries (see [EPIC-Europe](#)). It is coordinated by the World Health Organization . . ."ⁱⁱⁱ

What we learn from this study, and has been corroborated by other data, is that vegetarians have the same over-all mortality rates as omnivores. We do better in some areas, but we die from strokes and neurological diseases. These causes of death have been linked to low B12 levels. They have also been linked to low folate levels. However, folate is found abundantly in green leafy vegetables. So, you can eat your way to folate happiness. With B12, you must supplement. Here's how.

If you feel you have any of the above symptoms, go to your healthcare provider and get an MMA [Methylmalonic acid] test. You should ensure your B12 level. If it is low, I would suggest taking 2000 mcg of B12 in a sublingual tablet form once a week for 4 weeks. Then, lower the dose to 1000 mcg per week. Again, I would check with your healthcare provider. However, since B12 is water-based the worst that will happen is

that you will have above-average B12 levels in your urine. Sublingual means the pill is placed under the tongue. The supplement label will clearly state if the B12 is sublingual. There have been studies on kids that show they get a higher amount of B12 if they use a sublingual form. Just let it melt under your tongue. I strongly recommend you take B12 as a single supplement, not as part of a multi-vitamin.

I would also invest in vitamin D, 4000 international units daily if you are indoors for most of the day or live above Atlanta, Georgia. You can opt out during the summer if you are outside without sun screen for at least 20 minutes daily. Be sure to supplement with a vegan vitamin D2, aka ergocalciferol. Many vitamin D tablets are from animal sources. Those are vitamin D3, aka cholecalciferol. I have seen some vitamin D3 containers stating they are vegan. I'm not sure how they square the biochemistry. I actually have seen vitamin D3 listed as ergocalciferol. Unless you know the manufacturer, if you see this I would move to another brand that knows what they are selling.

When it comes to DHA or Omega-3's, I err on the side of caution. I take them from a microalgae source which is how fish get them.^{iv v} I have many colleagues who do not think vegetarians or vegans need to take a DHA supplement. The following experts have written various opinions- Brenda Davis, RD; Dr. Michael Gregor, Jeff Novick, MS, RD, LDN and Dr. John McDougall. I respect each of them. Do your homework and decide if it is right for you.

What is DHA or Omega-3? This is a fatty acid that your body does not make. You have to ingest it. It helps your retina grow properly, assists your hormonal and neural balance and keeps your skin looking good. Without it you end up with stunted growth, lousy skin and a nasty or depressed attitude. Reminds me of a chef I once knew.

There have been studies showing that vegetarians, as well as older people, do not metabolize these essential fatty acids as well as meat eaters.^{vi} Jeff Novick sent around a study suggesting that vegetarians do. As a mom and a person of a certain age, I figure the nominal fee I pay to be sure my cells are up to snuff is worth it. I also like cooking with another source of Omega 3's - flax meal, not flax seed or oil. If you are a parent, you will understand when I say flax seeds come in and go out in the same packaging. Like corn. Many people buy flax oil, but forget to take it regularly. Flax oil is extremely susceptible to rancidity. So, you need to finish the bottle by the date on the label. One woman came up to me after a presentation.

“I’ve had a bottle of flax oil in my refrigerator for 6 months. Should I still take it?”

“Is it opened?”

“Yes.”

“The bottle will make a lovely addition to your recycle bin.”

Get a cheap coffee grinder. Grind as much flax as you will need for a week and put it into an opaque container. Store it in the fridge. I suggest taking 2 tablespoons a day broken up within your meals. It adds a nutty flavor to salads and is a great egg substitute in baking. Add one tablespoon of flax meal to 3 tablespoons of water in a container with a lid. Shake it up and let sit while you gather the rest of your ingredients. Use it just like eggs in your recipe. Okay, you cannot make a frittata with it.

Beware - flax meal can also be used as a laxative. If you take the whole 2 tablespoons at once, you may never leave your house for the day.

Notice there is no reference to multivitamins in the aforementioned. I have read a few studies on the actual content of multivitamins. The end result is that they usually do not contain what is on the label. I am a picky pill popper. I want to know that what I am taking is actually there.

If you have some specific ailment you may need to take other supplements, but for most of us these are all you really need.

Now, about those “I was always hungry”, “I got sick” issues.

If you have been eating a heavily meat-dairy based diet you are used to feeling full after a meal for quite a while. That is due to these foods sitting in the digestive tract. Think Los Angeles traffic jam. They have little water and almost zero fiber - two nutrients that move digesting material along the intestinal highway. Animal products have high amounts of fat. Fats take longer to empty out of the stomach. Therefore, even though you may be eating the same amount of calories, usually the amount or volume of animal foods is smaller. Conversely, plant based foods have more fiber and water. They move

quicker through the intestine and colon. Think high speed train. This leads to increasing the volume of food in the snacks and meals necessary to keep up with daily activity.

Relax, this is how we were made. We were made to grind our food and use fiber to push victuals through this long tube, approximately 25 feet, of our intestinal tract pulling out nutrients as we go. Your dog or cat can eat almost 30% of their weight of an uncooked animal with no fiber, and get it through their, relatively, short intestinal tract after which they will not need to eat again until the next day. If you were 150 pounds, could you imagine eating 50 pounds of food at one sitting? Honor your hunger by having more fruit around to take care of those snack attacks.

A couple of reasons people become ill after a week of a vegetarian diet is that they have 1) gone on the broccoli-brown rice diet, or 2) had a steady stream of pesticide treated, high fat foods in their diet for a long time.

What is the broccoli-brown rice diet? I had at least three secretaries tell me that they switched to broccoli and brown rice when they became vegetarians. That was it, other than a couple of pieces of fruit and maybe oatmeal in the morning. This diet does not have enough calories and/or protein sources. Now, don't get me wrong. I can't stand folks asking me where I get my protein. There are so many sources. But, if you aren't eating enough calories and you are not eating anything but vegetables and fruits, you won't get enough protein. If these gals had added a small handful of nuts and some legumes to that diet, they probably would have been fine. But, they had a hard time realizing that the foods they had been eating were more calorie-dense. They couldn't fathom that they could eat more foods, that they would need to eat a higher volume of foods that were low in calories and fats to maintain the same caloric intake. Thus they were hungry and didn't feel good. I wouldn't stick with any diet that didn't make me feel good.

Let's look at number 2 - the pesticide problem.

Pesticides and herbicides are oil based. Ever hear that oil and water don't mix? Well, those pesticides can be hanging out in fat cells.

Here you are all happy to start eating plants and low fat foods. You may have even increased your physical activity. Now those fat cells begin to breakdown. Guess what else is released with your oils. Those pesticide residues. You can have a small steady stream of chemicals being flushed out of your body.

It doesn't mean stop losing weight and forget about helping the planet. It does mean to support what you are doing by drinking a lot of clean water and eating high fiber foods that will take this stuff out of the body as quickly as possible.

Does going veg mean you have to complicate your life? No more than any other life change. It is a different way to feed your body. When I had food allergies, I had to change my diet. I had to take some time and think about how I was going to feed myself. The first week was an interesting experience, but then I got the hang of it and realized how much better I felt and stayed with the program. The same is true if you are changing your diet to go veg. Luckily, there are a host of books, magazines, websites, and webzines on nutrition and cooking to help you. A consultation with a vegetarian dietitian can really set you on the path quickly.

In the long run, becoming a veghead keeps my "pills" from being medication, and my "hunger" just a natural occurrence satiated with what I can pluck from the garden.

ⁱ Norris, J. 2009. Vitamin B12: Are You Getting It? Retrieved from <http://www.veganhealth.org/b12/> on January 4, 2010.

ⁱⁱ <http://www.epic-oxford.org/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Key TJ, Appleby PN, Spencer EA, Travis RC, Roddam AW, Allen NE. Mortality in British Vegetarians: Results from the European Prospective Investigation into Cancer and Nutrition (Epic-Oxford). *Am J Clin Nutr.* 2009; 89(5):1613S-1619S. Retrieved from <http://www.epic-oxford.org/publications/?c=EPIC-Oxford> on September 27, 2009.

^{iv} [Omega-3 fatty acids for nutrition and medicine: considering microalgae oil as a vegetarian source of EPA and DHA.](#)

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Curr Diabetes Rev. 2007 Aug;3(3):198-203. Review.

^v [Bioequivalence of Docosahexaenoic acid from different algal oils in capsules and in a DHA-fortified food.](#)

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Lipids. 2007 Nov;42(11):1011-24. Epub 2007 Aug 23.

^{vi} [Do vegetarians have to eat fish for optimal cardiovascular protection?](#)

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