

Should You or Shouldn't You Become a Vegetarian?

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A few decades ago, I thought the answer to that question was “Yes, everybody should become a vegetarian. Forty years after I first became a vegetarian, I have a much less black or white answer to that question. In order to explain how I have come to believe that vegetarianism is not the automatic right choice for everybody, I need to talk a little about my personal experiences with vegetarianism over the last forty years. I think the personal information I share in this article will help you decide whether becoming a vegetarian is the right choice for you, and help clear up some misconceptions about vegetarianism.

I became a vegetarian at the age of nineteen, way back in 1973. I was inspired to do so by the book by Frances Moore Lappe’ entitled **Diet For a Small Planet**. I became what was known as a “political vegetarian.” A lot of what Lappe discusses, in that ground breaking book about vegetarianism, is how much energy and resources can be saved by a vegetarian diet, and how the saved resources could then be used to alleviate world hunger.

As Ms. Lappe explained in her book, most cows and pigs raised in the United States are not grazed on prairie grasses, nor are most chickens scratching in the barnyard for insects. Cows, pigs and chickens are raised in livestock yards or cages and fed foods that are edible for human consumption: soybeans, wheat, rye, barley, corn, etc. When you feed foods such as these to livestock, a large percentage of that food is lost in the conversion process of the animals; that is for every pound of soy, corn, wheat, barley and rye that you feed livestock animals, you do NOT get back a pound of beef, pork or chicken or eggs. For beef, the conversion loss of grains / beans fed, to meat produced, is 16 to 1, for dairy cows it is 6 to 1, for pork it is 6 to 1, turkey 4 to 1, chicken meat 3 to 1, and eggs 3 to 1. A meat centered diet is therefore a very inefficient use of food resources, which is why countries that are poor i.e. Mexico or India, eat very little meat. In other words, you can feed way more people with the same amount of acres of land, water, fertilizers, and labor when the grains and legumes are eaten directly, than fed to animals and then eating the meat. [However, in the US, the dairy and beef industries have powerful political lobbies and procure a lot of government subsidies that do artificially decrease the cost of a meat centered verses a vegetarian diet.] Another “political” reason for a vegetarian diet is that livestock feedlots are a major source of water pollution. In addition, if I remember correctly, McDonalds encroaches on rain forest land to raise beef in South America.

So as a very idealistic young person with a “Save the World” orientation, I aspired to become a vegan; a vegetarian who ate no beef, chicken or eggs, pork, or dairy products, because I felt it was the moral thing to do so more food would be available to feed starving people in Third World countries. There were plenty of other young folks with similar aspirations. This interest in vegetarianism spawned vegetarian food co-ops in many cities in the United States in the 1970’s. Along with being vegetarian, the product line of most of the food co-ops were also “natural” foods.

I learned a lot about vegetarianism from my ten years of working at a food co-op in Ann Arbor, Michigan. One of the first things I learned, was that there was more than one kind of vegetarian. There were the “political” vegetarians as I have described above. There were also health motivated vegetarians who believed a vegetarian diet was much healthier than a meat diet for a variety of reasons including lower cholesterol and fat intake, and eating lower on the food chain meant you consumed less of the pesticide residue found in meats. There were also vegetarians whose prime motivation for not eating meat was a belief that it was morally wrong for humans to unnecessarily kill animals for food, and they also had issues with how livestock animals are treated, both during their lifetime, and at the time of slaughter.

The food co-ops therefore attracted many different kinds of vegetarians. As the food co-ops grew, they also began attracting non-vegetarians who were interested in the natural foods product line (stores like Whole Foods and Trader Joes were not yet in existence). Food co-ops are democratic organizations so there

began to be power struggles about what should, and should not, be carried in the stores. Some members wanted the stores to remain vegetarian, and some thought the focus should just be natural foods, and that the co-ops should carry organic meat.

I was a full-time staff member at People's Food Coop in Ann Arbor, Michigan, one of the larger stores in the country. The issue of whether PFC should remain vegetarian got quite heated, and the co-op decided it needed to draft a mission statement which would decide the issue of whether PFC was to remain vegetarian or not. It was first decided that the mission statement would not state that the co-op would be vegetarian because it endorsed the philosophy that it was morally wrong to kill animals; the majority of people thought this was too "Food Fascist." Furthermore, as education coordinator, I had to explain to the co-op board of directors that Peoples' Food Co-op actually already carried lots of products that involved the killing of animals. PFC was not a vegan co-op, (I don't think there were actually any vegan co-ops anywhere in the country), it was a lacto/ovo vegetarian co-op, meaning it sold eggs, yogurt, cheeses, milk, etc along with beans/grains/fruits//vegetables/nuts & seeds. To keep a dairy cow milking, you have to keep her pregnant. Fifty percent of the time she gives birth to a male calf, who is then sold to be raised for meat. Likewise, when a dairy cow's milk production slackens, she is killed; dairy cows only live about 25% of the true lifespan of a cow. Egg-laying chickens are likewise killed when their egg production drops. In addition, 90% of cheese in the United States is made using animal rennet (a part of cow intestines) to coagulate the cheese. So, the reality is, if you don't want to kill to eat, you have to be a vegan. Most people are so removed from food production that they have no idea of the killing involved in the production of the cheese or milk or eggs on their table.

There was a strong component of co-op members who thought the Peoples' Food Co-op should remain vegetarian for political reasons, as discussed above, a vegetarian diet saves energy and resources thereby freeing up more resources to address world hunger problems. As the education coordinator of Peoples Food Co-op, I was actually sent to Cornell University for a week to further discuss this issue of how much protein was lost in the conversion process of livestock.

Well after discussing the issue with the head of the animal agriculture of Cornell University, I had to report back to the board of directors that it would make no sense for Peoples' Food Co-op to draft a mission statement that said it was vegetarian because of the political reasons of "food resources efficiency". The reason being, chicken and pork actually have a better conversion ratio than dairy cows. The co-op was obviously not going to eliminate its full line of yogurts, chesses, milk, and all the products that contain dairy products. So, to make a long story short, Peoples Food Coop did not include a stipulation that it would remain vegetarian in its mission statement, and like most food co-ops around the country, it eventually began carrying organic chicken, beef, and pork and fish products as well.

So, to return to the topic of this article, "Should You or Shouldn't You Become a Vegetarian", you should not become a vegetarian because you do not believe in killing animals to eat, unless you intend to become a vegan, because there is significant killing involved in the production of lacto/ovo vegetarian foods. Likewise, you should not become a vegetarian to save planetary food resources unless you intend to become a vegan because chicken meant is more resource efficient than dairy products. As it turned out, I only remained a vegan for about a year. Though philosophically I wanted to be a vegan after learning how many food resources were wasted in converting the grains and beans feed to livestock to produce meat, I just did not have the self-discipline to live without so many of the foods I had grown up eating. I have no problem eating vegan dishes a few times a week but I just can't handle the deprivation involved 365 days per year. I can still vividly remember how elated I was the first time I again allowed myself to eat some pumpkin pie with whipped cream, or to have bleu cheese on my salads, or to eat turkey at Thanksgiving dinner. Some vegans I know really do not seem to miss eating dairy products and some lacto/ovo vegetarians I know do not seem to miss eating meat. But I was miserable being a vegan. So, from my personal experiences, I think that whether or not you experience giving up meat or dairy/eggs as significant deprivation should play into your decision of whether to become a vegetarian. For some people, (myself included) food is a huge component of their happiness.

If you are attracted to the idea of vegetarianism for the political reasons described above, but like me, don't have the self discipline to be a vegetarian, there are, in fact, other personal lifestyle things you can do besides be a vegetarian, to work on world hunger issues. Instead of being a vegan, you can monitor your consumption of other planetary resources such as limiting air travel, driving an energy efficient car, work on world peace issues so billions spent on military weapons can be decreased, and overall decrease the amount of consumer goods you purchase. You can then channel the money you did not spend on these planetary resources towards World Hunger causes or other charities. Let me now move on to health advantages of vegetarianism.

There are definitely health advantages to being a vegetarian. Cultures that have a high percentage of meat in their diets have a greater incidence of heart disease. Meat is high in cholesterol and fat, and grains and legumes contain no cholesterol at all, and are low fat. Therefore, anyone who has a history of heart disease in their family should consider becoming a vegetarian. Bill Clinton, for example, after suffering a heart attack, has become a strong proponent of vegetarianism. However, not just any kind of vegetarianism has health advantages over a meat centered diet. Some people who become vegetarians have a difficult time giving up the rich, intense flavor of meat and find grains, beans, tofu, etc., bland. So they start eating a lot of vegetarian dishes that contain cheeses or other dairy products and this negates the health advantage of eating vegetarian. For example, a whole wheat bean burrito consisting of beans and lettuce and tomatoes is a healthy alternative to a steak or pork chop, but a bean burrito with cheese and sour cream preceded by cheese nachos is not; a traditional meat dinner of a lean steak with a salad and a baked potato would be a healthier meal in terms of cholesterol and fat. So vegan vegetarianism is where the advantages are for heart disease prevention, not lacto-ovo vegetarianism. Also, if you do not suffer from or have a family history of heart disease and do not have a high cholesterol count, the advantages of a vegetarian diet are not as significant.

Cultures with high meat consumption also have a higher incidence of colon cancer. So becoming a vegetarian may reduce your risk of colon cancer. Particularly because grains and legumes are a great source of dietary fiber. If colon cancer runs in your family, becoming a vegetarian could be a very good choice. However, a vegan form of vegetarianism rather than a vegetarian diet containing a lot of dairy products is what would reduce your chances of colon cancer. Eating lower on the food chain also means you consume less pesticide residue in your foods. So if any kind of cancer runs in your family, a vegetarian diet is probably a better choice for you. It's possible eating only organic meats could resolve this. But avoiding fish and seafood might be advisable. Avoiding meats also means you are not ingesting residue antibiotics found in animal flesh; raising cattle/pigs/chicken in feedlots requires them to be pumped full of antibiotics.

There are other health issues beside heart disease and cancer for which vegetarianism does not weigh in as favorably. My most pressing health issue as a middle-aged person is weight control. When I was a young, active person with a young person's metabolism, I had no trouble remaining slim on a vegetarian diet. But as I became a middle-aged person with a very busy life and a 9-5 desk job, and an artificial knee so I can't jog, I started to gain weight. When I reached the point of being ten pounds overweight I became concerned, as I did not want that to creep up to twenty pounds, which is pretty typical for middle-aged Americans. I therefore developed an interest in the low carb approach to weight loss and long-term weight control. All the people I observed who were following a low carb diet lost weight quicker than any diet I had ever seen and those who continued to be conscientious carb counters, kept the extra weight off. I began doing research about low carb diets. What I quickly discovered, is that a vegetarian diet was much higher carb than a health oriented meat centered diet. Beef, chicken, pork, and eggs have no carbs and lots of protein. So it is much easier to put together a lunch or dinner that is low carb that includes a lean steak or chicken breast or fish, than any kind of legume or grain based protein. So people struggling with weight control issues may not be well suited to a vegetarian diet. In addition, if you are a Diabetic, weight control is very important because an extra ten to fifteen pounds can really increase your blood sugar levels. I personally think diabetics should eat some fish and chicken and beef rather than all vegetarian sources of protein to reduce the number of carbs they are consuming.

Now, I am not meaning to imply that legumes and grains are horrible, high carb foods. The main high carb foods that make people fat are soft drinks, and sugary desserts, and beer can be a problem too. But—it

is still true that a bean/grain based main course has more carbs than meat centered main course. Therefore, it is difficult to eat desserts regularly as a middle aged person without gaining weight, particularly if you are eating typical vegetarian main courses. So if you are a person who cannot live without deserts, you may want to include a fair amount of lean meats in your diet. I prefer to sometimes eat a lean meat dinner and the carbs I save by doing that, earn me a Hagen-Daz ice cream bar for the same overall carb count! However, everybody needs to include some high fiber foods in their diet, so even if you are striving to eat low carb, you need to allow some carbs for some high fiber foods, like whole wheat bread.

In summary, the decision of whether or not you should become vegetarian is somewhat complex. There are many different kinds of vegetarian foods, some are really healthy i.e. legumes and whole grains and others, like many dairy products, are not much healthier, or sometimes less healthy, than meat or fish. Whether vegetarianism is the right choice for you can also depend on your particular health issues and family history of disease. If you are attracted to the idea of vegetarianism because you don't believe in killing, be aware that unless you are a vegan, and eat no animal products at all, there is a lot of killing involved in the cheese, milk, yogurt, eggs (and all huge number of foods that contain milk and eggs) that you have sitting on your table. If you want to be a vegetarian, make that choice from an informed position. For those attracted to vegetarianism for political reasons, that is to free up planetary food resources to address world hunger issues, I salute your compassion for humanity. I did not have the will power to remain a strict vegetarian, but I still think this could be a better world with less hunger and pollution, and less ecological destruction if there were more vegan vegetarians. However, there are other ways of rechanneling world resources towards alleviating world hunger besides being a vegetarian. Things like limiting one's air travel, driving an energy efficient car, limiting overall consumption of consumer goods to a reasonable level are other ways, besides being a vegetarian, can free up financial resources that can then be donated to organizations fighting world hunger. Lastly, let me add, vegetarianism does not have to be a black or white issue, you can eat some vegetarian dishes each week, as well as some meat dishes. This is where my diet ended up forty years after my first introduction to vegetarianism forty years ago.