

Vegetarianism

Vegetarianism is the practice of eating only foods from plants and avoiding all animal flesh, including red meat, poultry, and fish, and sometimes dairy products. A vegetarian diet consists of grains, beans, vegetables, and fruits, and the foods made from them, such as tofu, pasta, rice dishes, bean burritos, and even simulated meats. Vegetarians are classified into different types, depending on the acceptance of animal products. Lacto-ovo (or ovo-lacto) vegetarians consume milk or cheese, eggs, and sometimes honey, while vegans consume no animal products at all.

People may choose a vegetarian diet because of a variety of religious, philosophical, and ethical beliefs. Some people abstain from eating meat for religious reasons, for example Jains, and some Buddhists and Hindus, who believe that the killing and eating of animals violates the ethical precept of ahimsa, or non-violence. Ecological reasons motivate other people, because much less land and food outlay is required to raise vegetables and grain than livestock.

Some people avoid animal products for health reasons. Vegetarians may live longer and have much lower risks for heart disease, cancer, diabetes, and other serious illness. They also tend to be thinner, to have lower blood pressure, and have a lower risk of osteoporosis, a condition in which the bones get weaker as a person ages. These health effects are attributed to the fact that vegetarian diets tend to be lower in fat and cholesterol and higher in fiber and certain vitamins.

People may adopt a vegetarian diet due to concerns about the methods used for raising animals. Most chickens, pigs, and veal calves are raised in close confinement and are given chemical additives in their feed, and these practices offend many people, for health and humane reasons.

In the past it was thought that vegetarians might develop protein deficiencies if they did not carefully combine their foods. It is now known that such careful planning is not necessary. Protein deficiencies do not occur if one eats a variety of plant foods and eats enough to maintain one's weight. However, most nutritionists believe that vegans should eat vitamin-enriched cereals or take a vitamin supplement for vitamin B-12, which is needed in small amounts for healthy blood and nerves.

Health foods are a loosely defined food category, usually involving foods labeled organic or natural. Organic foods are grown without chemical fertilizers or pesticides. Natural foods are processed without chemical additives (see Food Additives). Dietary health-food fads also come and go, including whole grains, brewer's yeast, nuts and seeds, yogurt, herbal teas, wheat and oat bran, and black strap molasses.

Interest in health foods has grown rapidly in the United States since the 1960's, after studies linked certain food additives with cancer and other diseases. That some pesticides used on crops and some chemicals used in food processing may be harmful to health is widely acknowledged. Health hazards have not been proved, however, for many chemicals, nor has it been proved that organically grown foods are nutritionally superior to those grown using chemical fertilizers.