

Vegetarianism and Health: Are you still eating meat?

(This article has been translated from Greek. A condensed version of this article was published in the Greek magazine "Vista" in April 2007).

The aim of this article is to provide information about vegetarianism and the benefits that a vegetarian diet can have on health - whether we are talking about our physical health, our mental health, our emotional health, our spiritual health or the health of our planet. We are multi-layered and multifaceted beings and for a way of life such as vegetarianism to be considered as being as of the highest benefit for us, we must look at whether it speaks to all of our levels of being.

So what does vegetarianism bring and say to us? Before we answer this question, let's look a little at some of the different forms of vegetarianism that exist, starting from the strictest forms and going towards the most elastic. Of course this list is not by any means exhaustive and there are many many variations on all of these forms.

1. There are people who live only by breathing, only on oxygen! They are called "Breatharians"!

2. "Fruitarianism" - only fruits - this way of being has many good points to make.

3. "Vegan Raw Foodists". Only raw fruits and vegetables, grains, sprouts, nuts etc.

4. "Vegan". Not raw food but no animal products at all included in diet. Only fruits, vegetables, grains, pulses and nuts.

5. "Vegetarian". Like Vegans but including dairy products and eggs and honey.

6. There are also some people who call themselves Vegetarian who eat like point no. 5 above but also include fish in their diet. (This is not Vegetarianism strictly speaking of course but there are quite a few Vegetarians who choose this option occasionally.)

I have been mainly Vegan (I do on occasion consume dairy products or eggs when they can't really be avoided or when I simply feel that I would like a piece of cake or a cookie or something! Never on their own though - since they simply do not appeal to me...) since 1999 and was also a Vegetarian for 4 years at an earlier time and am now a mostly Raw Vegan (since August of 2007). I am living the most alive, healthy and full of energy period of my life and from the moment I decided to become Vegetarian my life has been steadily "climbing" in this direction, though i was never sickly and never had to take medicines. I have never in my life taken medications apart from in childhood for basic childhood illnesses - i had no choice - and a pain killer once when it could not be avoided. My overall health has been excellent and my weight also, while not always exactly as i wanted it, has always been relatively steady because of my focus on plant foods and healthy food.

Even though i always naturally chose and ate mostly Vegetarian foods, I came to the final decision to become Vegan through my healing contact with my Teacher Petrene Soames and through many years of my own personal experimentation and research on the subject of diet and nutrition. I am writing in the hope that this article will inspire and inform you and that more and more people will come to a similar conclusion for themselves. Let me take you through some of the steps I had to get through in order to get to where I am:

Let's start with the simplest, or rather, most material level:

Physical Health

In my opinion the basic ideas one must "get over" on this level in order to be able to make the informed choice to be really and steadily a committed vegetarian are these:

1. Iron and anemia:

Anemia is a subject which we hear a great deal about which could cause fear, especially here in the Mediterranean where there is apparently a strain of Anemia specific to the Mediterranean peoples. Unfortunately, something we don't hear too much about is that there is plenty of Iron to be found for us without consuming meat or meat products!

Dark green leafy vegetables, lentils, beans and quite a few other legumes, peas and whole grain bread, among many other vegetarian foods, are all very good sources of iron in our diet, as are many herbs and herbal teas. For example, stinging nettle tea has been found to be excellent in treating iron deficiencies and a lot more efficient than meat products. A vegetarian diet, because it is usually richer in fruits and vegetables and therefore vitamin C, is actually also better for absorbing the iron that is eaten through our diet. Just by the way also, I have met many anemic meat eaters.

2. Calcium and Osteoporosis:

There has been a lot of research done on this subject and many books and websites have been written around this issue. Let me just say that there are very serious indications that milk and animal products not only do not prevent Osteoporosis but create it! Did you know that animal proteins force our body to excrete Calcium? Milk and yogurt are both animal proteins.

Osteoporosis is a relatively new disease and it is not only a few scientists which have linked it to the ever climbing consumption of milk and dairy products and animal products in the USA and western world. In China and Latin America where traditionally they consume hardly any dairy products there is and was no such thing as Osteoporosis! It only exists and is created in people who have adopted the western - meaning mainly American - way of life and nutrition.

It is also well known that most people's digestive systems, especially in the Mediterranean and in African cultures, have a very low tolerance for cow and dairy products - these foods create many health problems and unwanted side effects in their bodies, something not so strange if you think that milk is made by nature to very specifically and exactly feed cow's babies and not fully grown (nor baby) humans! The same goes for goat's milk. It may be more compatible to human digestive systems but it certainly was also made to feed baby goats and not humans.

3. Protein:

It is well known and accepted by most scientists now that we don't need the amount of protein that they thought we needed in the past, not do we need to be taking it from the same sources they used to think we needed it from, i.e. meat. We don't even need to take Soy Milk and Soy products as protein supplements and we don't need to combine grains with legumes to form "complete proteins" as they used to think we needed to do in the past. We get all the amino acids (the building blocks of protein) we need by consuming vegetables and grains and legumes and fruits. In other words when we have a rich and varied vegetarian diet we have no problem consuming all of the protein we need. Personally I would have no problem believing that protein would not even be an issue for a fruitarian, whose diet, it could be argued, is more limited than a vegetarian's.

To further this idea, an interesting fact I learnt recently is that human breast milk only contains 2.2% protein, and that has to accommodate rapidly growing baby bodies... Now that we are fully grown our protein needs are surely not any bigger than they were when we were actually in our highest growing phase. Most vegetable foods and fruits contain at least that amount of protein. Just simple oranges on their own for example, contain 18 of the 21 amino acids which are the building blocks of protein. This is something to think about. There is always new information being revealed so it is always good to keep in touch with new developments on the forefront of nutrition.

4. Vitamin B12 and Folic Acid:

It has been proven that vegetarians produce these two vitamins in their stomach and so do not need to consume them in the form of meat. Meat eaters can sometimes have low levels of these two vitamins, one explanation could be that their stomach and digestive system usually is not working as harmoniously as a vegetarian's.

I encourage you to do your own research on these issues and on whatever else is of interest to you or is an issue for you so that you can get your own answers. There are many books written and I have given you a few websites to start from at the end of this article. It can be confusing to sort through all of the information available because certainly as firm a believer as I am and many others are in vegetarianism there are just as many and possibly more firm believers in eating meat. So you need to have your heart your mind and your self very open when you gather information and when you read it and of course the decision will be up to you. It is my experience that to be able to be a long term, steady and committed Vegetarian one needs to be informed. Usually the media only show one side of the story and often they are "behind" the latest developments in human knowledge so I do encourage you to do your own research.

So let us continue: It has been shown that Vegetarians have a greater average life span than meat eaters do and also a better quality of life, meaning basically that they are happier! In the research that has been done, it seems that on average, vegetarians are less overweight, have higher energy levels, less depression, clearer skin, are not constipated, are less aggressive and have higher fertility levels and better sexual performance.

Something funny, enjoyable and nice: a poll by the New York Times (1998) on the street of New York found that Vegetarians "taste better and smell better" than meat-eaters do and also have "greater stamina and energy in bed"!

A small list of the sicknesses that have been linked to meat consumption is: the many and varied forms of cancer, multiple sclerosis, osteoporosis, heart problems, kidney and gall bladder stones, asthma and many others. It is not by chance that Vegetarianism has been used to cure illnesses like arthritis, cancer, rheumatism and other illnesses and is a basic part of whatever kind of body detoxification we may undertake.

Dickerson and Davis in 1986 compared vegetarians and meat eaters by creating pairs of people, one Vegetarian person with one meat eater, making sure that their basic levels of health were otherwise at the same levels and found that the Vegetarians only made 22% of the visits to hospital that the non Vegetarians made.

The Mediterranean Diet of which nutritionists all over the world are talking about and to which they attribute the great quantity and quality of life that the Mediterranean peoples enjoy, is very similar to a vegetarian diet - it contains high levels of fruit and vegetables and grains, olive oil and some fish.

Countries like America with the huge quantities - among other things - of meat which they consume, have the most overweight population in the world at this point. And towards this move all other countries that mimic their way of life and diet. Greece at this moment in time is the country with the highest obesity levels in the European Union! This surely did not happen while we were eating the Mediterranean diet but since we have adopted the "new", "modern" and most of all "rich" diet based on meat and on "easy", "fast" and processed foods. All of this philosophy of "easy" and "fast" food (in this I include the overproducing of meat as food for people) in essence is anything but easy if you take into account its effects on our health. It is this diet that will send us more quickly and "easily" to a doctor and to the hospital. A good thing if our goal is to get sick and to die early but not good if our goal is a long, healthy and happy life.

"The beef industry has contributed to more American deaths than all the wars of this century, all natural disasters, and all automobile accidents combined. If beef is your idea of 'real food for real people', you'd better live real close to a real good hospital."
Neal D. Barnard M.D.

Let us not follow the example of the U.S. on this then, which apart from the positive things which it brings to humanity, in terms of general health, consists of a living example of the damage which can be done consuming a diet based on meat and processed food. It is not by chance that so many books, movies and nutrition regimes based on Vegetarianism and Raw Food have been written there - there is a greater need for them there! This is the positive side of the situation. Let us look at the whole picture and let us select the positive things within it.

One exciting study which I read and which surprised me (I was already a devoted and relatively well-read Vegetarian), was a scientific comparison on a biological level between Vegetarian animals (herbivores), meat-eating animals (carnivores), animals which eat both meat and vegetable matter (omnivores) and humans. They compared 19 separate body parts for all these creatures, for example teeth, colon, stomach, nails etc. in order to see which type of animal us humans were closest to on a biological level.

For me, my preference for a Vegetarian way of life was clear - for all the reasons I have already mentioned plus all the reasons I will mention further along - but despite this fact I was basically expecting humans to be most like the omnivorous animals - after all, I saw humans consuming all sorts of foods and even though I might not like it and it might not be ideal for our bodies we seemed to be holding up relatively ok so I assumed that biologically we are built to eat anything we wanted. I was very pleasantly surprised to see that the research showed that humans matched in ALL their biological parts researched to the Herbivorous animals!

Humans are not biologically omnivorous!

You can read about this research at
http://www.poweredbyveggies.com/veg/comparative_anatomy_of_eating.html".
The comparative anatomy of eating by Milton R. Mills M.D.

Read also this funny and very to the point quote about the same subject by animal rights activist Harvey Diamond:

"You put a baby in a crib with an apple and a rabbit. If it eats the rabbit and plays with the apple, I'll buy you a new car."

Emotional Health

Here we come to the emotions and how they are affected by a Vegetarian or non-Vegetarian diet. Of course it is hard to separate the emotions from the mind and from the soul and the body but we will try for the purposes of this article.

There is the well known phrase which says "you are what you eat". Let us look at this here from the point of view of our emotions.

As we said before, there are clear indications that meat eaters are much more susceptible to emotional illnesses and disturbances such as depression, extreme nervous strain, aggressiveness, stress, fear/panic attacks etc. something which should not surprise us if we ponder a little more on our subject:

Well known activist and Pulitzer Prize winning writer Alice Walker has said:

"I know, in my soul, that to eat a creature who is raised to be eaten, and who

never has a chance to be a real being, is unhealthy. It's like...you're just eating misery. You're eating a bitter life."

A life full of pain, sadness and torture. Maybe it would be different if we ate animals which had the chance to live a normal life but the animals which are raised in the meat industry live really miserable and tortuous lives, full of the one barbaric thing after the other. Fear, misery and unbearable pain are their everyday companions.

I could give you many different and specific examples of this for all of the animals but I am not going to do it - there are many websites that have this information and you can find them yourselves. I will just ask you simply how would you like it if you had to live all of your brief (mercifully) and sad life in a cage in which you do not even have the space to turn around? Without feeling the sun on your body or without seeing real light and without breathing ever clean and clear air except for the few moments between your prison and the overloaded truck which is going to take you to your death? How would you feel if you couldn't breathe in that truck and you might die and many of your friends do and that you get to the slaughter house and you must wait in line to be killed, watching, feeling, hearing all of the others being killed in front of you?

I personally have totally rejected this reality - I do not want it to be a part of my world and for this reason I do not eat meat, and I have never felt better. When I think about it, it cannot but remind me of pictures of Nazi Germany. If we all rejected it, then it would not exist at all.

This is the reality that we force our physically weaker companions on this earth, the animals, to take part in, against their wishes, everyday. And I have said very little about what goes on in that world. What goes on in that world is unbelievable in many ways and to be informed about it with an open mind and heart brings wellsprings of tears and deep feelings of shock, disgust, pain, sadness and anger.

Children are often the most open to all of this, being open as they are and will often not eat meat if they know where it came from ie. that it was a live chicken before it got on their plate. I was quickly (holding my breath) walking past the meat market here in Athens recently and a little boy who was holding on to the hand of his father and who was walking by also right in front of me, spontaneously vomited and kept on walking! It was due to the smell and stench of death. Strange how some of us then put this on our plate and eat it!

In reality, the meat industry at this point in time is one of the worst and most cruel things on this earth and if most of us saw what went on within it, it is very likely that fewer and fewer people would be their "customers". There is a reason that the slaughterhouses are so far away from our sight:

"If slaughterhouses had glass walls, everyone would be vegetarian. We feel better about ourselves and better about the animals, knowing we're not contributing to their pain." , Paul and Linda McCartney

The same things could be said about the milk and dairy industry and the egg industry also. For us to be able to have "our" milk, cheese and yogurt, mother cows in the thousands have their babies taken from them 24-48 hours after their birth (in nature they would be feeding their children and living with them for at least 6-8 months). They cry and bellow for their babies. So too the babies for their mothers. They are forced to be continuously and unnaturally pregnant and to go through this continually to be able to continually produce milk. They are forced into a life of non-movement and are constantly connected to steel electric milking machines. Despite all of the drugs and medicines that are administered to them so that they are able to stand this life and so that the dairy industry can get their money's worth from them, they live only one fifth of the life span that they would live if they lived naturally and free because of these awful living conditions. They become ill, they die, "all used up". A cruel life. A life that humans decide and choose and force upon them, the

gentlest of creatures, a life which will continue as long as we continue to consume it's products.

As for their male offspring who cannot go on to become milk producers, what happens to them? They are scheduled for a short life of almost complete non-movement so that their meat can be soft and pink as is preferred by their more "sophisticated" consumers.

You can read much more about milk and the issues surrounding it at these two brilliant sites: www.milksucks.com and www.notmilk.com

How eggs are produced is a whole other story just as sad and barbaric.

You can read more about all these animal abuse issues and order your own free vegetarian starter kit at www.peta.org

Vegetarianism, and if you don't want to become "Vegetarian" strictly, a diet which comes closer and closer to that, has countless benefits for the whole world.

Eating meat, we eat pain, we eat fear, we eat misery, we eat torture. There are hormones created in animal bodies through their awful living conditions which when we eat meat go into our bodies. We cannot do this and expect and hope for a life of joy, happiness and health - it is just not possible, these things are opposite to each other. Our emotions and our emotional life become immediately better when we do not feed them with foods so full of negative emotions.

Let's talk about the medicines that we unwittingly consume when we consume the meat that is so full of them.

For the animals to be able to survive, even for the short while that they do under these living conditions, they are given large and continuous doses of antibiotics and other medicines, and also growth hormones and unnatural diets given to create faster and unnatural growth that equals more profits for the meat industry companies. Of course we eat all of these too when we eat their meat. It is also not rare that animals are ill with cancers even though they are taking all of this medicine and so we eat their illness too. The "mad cow disease" as they called it (perhaps it should have been called the "mad people disease" seeing as it was caused by people and not cows!) came about because people were feeding cows the flesh of other cows! Apart from whatever ethical reasons we may have for being against this, cows are naturally herbivorous animals! This widespread illness and the more recent outbreak of poultry disease are two very recent and very strong negative examples of the dangerous effects of the meat industry. Examples we should stop and pay attention to instead of bypassing so easily.

John Harvey Kellog, speaking about the joy of being vegetarian said:

"When we eat vegetarian foods, we needn't worry about what kind of disease our food died from; this makes a joyful meal!"

Mental Health

So what is there to say about the health benefits of a vegetarian diet on our minds?

It should be by now obvious that our minds are calmer for not eating meat. The basic thing that I have discovered is that if we want to be honest with ourselves and if we are and want to be deep thinking and consciously aware people we will see that we can keep up the habit of eating meat only if we do not think about all the things I have already written about. If we did think about them, very simply we would not be able to eat meat! Or we would be able to eat meat but we would be nervous wrecks - which as already said is proven by the

fact that meat eaters do suffer from many more nervous conditions than their non meat eating counterparts.

It also follows, that by eating meat (if we are), we are making a choice which consciously or not, because of the above, means that we must minimize the depth and the breadth of our thinking! Science already says that we are only using 10% of our mind, let's not make this even less.

The British Medical Journal did a study over 20 years which found and shows that Vegetarianism is related to a higher I.Q.! Children which at ten years old had a higher I.Q. than others had more chance of being Vegetarian at thirty years old!

So which came first, the chicken or the egg?

Just as intelligence seems to go with vegetarianism, choosing a vegetarian diet can also influence our minds in a positive way.

A recent study at the National Institute of Aging in the United States found that the consumption of vegetables is linked to a less mental deterioration as we grow older. The people who ate at least 2.8 servings per day of vegetables saw any expected mental deterioration reduced by 40%. This is equal to about a 5 years younger age!

Most Vegetarians will say that they feel their mind to be much clearer than it was before when they ate meat:

"My refusing to eat meat occasioned inconvenience, and I have been frequently chided for my singularity. But my light repast allows for greater progress, for greater clearness of head and quicker comprehension."

Some of the biggest philosophers and explorers in the world, amongst them also some ancient Greeks, were passionate vegetarians: Pythagoras, Socrates, Plato, Leonardo Da Vinci and Albert Einstein. Vegetarianism seems to be highly important to awareness. Albert Einstein has characteristically said:

"Nothing will benefit human health and increase chances for survival of life on Earth as much as the evolution to a vegetarian diet."

And also:

"A human being is a part of the whole, called by us the 'Universe', a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings, as something separate from the rest - a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty. Nobody is able to achieve this completely, but the striving for such achievement is in itself a part of the liberation and a foundation for inner security."

The Health of the Earth

We haven't yet talked yet about the ecological side of Vegetarianism. How and why would a Vegetarian diet be a diet that is beneficial for our planet? Like with all the other Vegetarian issues, there are many books written on this subject and websites dedicated to this issue and we don't have nearly enough time or space to go through them all here. One such book is called "Diet for a Small planet" (20th Century Edition) and is written by Frances Moore Lappe.

In the meantime, I will leave you with a simple general quote about this whole subject by Sume Ching Hai, Spiritual Teacher:

"Raising animals for meat has its consequences. It leads to rain forest destruction, global heat rising, water pollution, water scarcity, desertification, misuse of energy resources, and world hunger. The use of land, water, energy, and human effort to produce meat is not an efficient way to use the earth's resources."

Read her full thought provoking article at www.godsdirectcontact.org

The issue of world hunger is a very big one. It doesn't have only to do with food, it has to do with the whole "humanity" of humanity and where that is at and so it also has to do with the spirituality of mankind and we have gone into that already, but even putting that aside, on a purely physical and practical level, Vegetarianism is in my opinion and in the opinion of many scientists also, one of the basic and fundamental things that must be wide spread if we ever hope to really deal with the problem of world hunger:

"About 2,000 pounds of grain must be supplied to livestock in order to produce enough meat and other livestock products to support a person for a year, whereas 400 pounds of grain eaten directly will support a person for a year. Thus a given quantity of grain eaten directly will feed 5 times as many people as it will if it is eaten indirectly by humans in the form of livestock products"
M.E. Ensminger, PH.D.

The Health of the Soul

And now we come to the soul. How does being vegetarian help and heal the soul? If it is not clear yet, my opinion is that vegetarianism brings peace and deep calm to the soul as well as helping us to reach higher and higher into the universe and into our own divinity.

Leo Tolstoy, well known for being a compassionate human and vegetarian and widely hailed as a writer has this to say:

"This is dreadful! Not the suffering and death of the animals, but that a man suppresses in himself, unnecessarily, the highest spiritual capacity - that of sympathy and pity towards living creatures like himself - and by violating his own feelings becomes cruel. And how deeply seated in the human heart is the injunction not to take life!"

And:

"This [towards Vegetarian] movement should cause special joy to those whose life lies in the effort to bring about the kingdom of God on earth, not because vegetarianism is in itself an important step towards that kingdom (all true steps are both important and unimportant), but because it is a sign that the aspiration of mankind towards moral perfection is serious and sincere."

Many religions from around the world, for example Buddhism, have Vegetarianism as one of their basic tenets. Most Spiritual Teachers don't eat meat and those who do, do so under specific circumstances and with all the respect and reverence for the life of the animal whose flesh they are consuming. Within the Greek Orthodox religion there are periods of fasting in which people abstain from any and all animal products. It is said that the Buddha said:

"To become vegetarian is to step into the stream which leads to nirvana."

And I personally like this very much. And I agree. It is my hope and wish that we all become more aware, more healthy and choose a future with peace and joy and without violence. I am practical, I don't simply hope but I live it and being a vegetarian is a big part of that. To expect peace on earth to manifest and at the same time to send thousands of animals to the slaughterhouse daily would not be logical. It is an impossible expectation that cannot be met, destined to disappoint. If you need any further convincing, [Pythagoras](#),

widely considered to be the father of geometry has this to say about the issue:

"For as long as men massacre animals, they will kill each other. Indeed, he who sows the seed of murder and pain cannot reap joy and love."

and:

"As long as Man continues to be the ruthless destroyer of lower living beings he will never know health or peace. For as long as men massacre animals, they will kill each other. Indeed, he who sows the seed of murder and pain cannot reap joy and love."

And speaking of scientists, there is Quantum physics. Quantum physics has come to the conclusion that we are what we think, we are what we feel, indeed, we really ARE what we eat! These things are the base from which we create our reality. Reality is nothing but what we ourselves have created - with our thoughts, with our emotions, with our bodies. Therefore if we want to create a world without violence we must start with not accepting and not creating violence and an easy and simple way to do this and for this reason perhaps a first and basic way to do this, is to stop being violent towards and stop eating animals.

"Isn't man an amazing animal? He kills wildlife - birds, kangaroos, deer, all kinds of cats, coyotes, beavers, groundhogs, mice, foxes and dingoes by the million in order to protect his domestic animals and their feed. Then he kills domestic animals by the billion and eats them. This in turn kills man by the million, because eating all those animals leads to degenerative - and fatal - health conditions like heart disease, kidney disease, and cancer. So then man tortures and kills millions more animals to look for cures for these diseases. Elsewhere, millions of other human beings are being killed by hunger and malnutrition because food they could eat is being used to fatten domestic animals. Meanwhile, some people are dying of sad laughter at the absurdity of man, who kills so easily and so violently, and once a year, sends out cards praying for "Peace on Earth."

David Coats, from his book "Old MacDonald's Factory Farm"

It's easy!

There are many many issues and ideas which one could analyze in regards to Vegetarianism, we have simply touched on some of the basic issues. I do hope that these will interest you enough that you do your own deeper search. There are many books and there is a lot of information out there about Vegetarianism and Veganism, complete with delicious recipes and with the Internet it is all at your fingertips!

The change to a Vegetarian diet is and can be very easy and simple. Vegetarianism, more specifically Veganism, and a diet that comes closer and closer to resembling it, is something valuable for ourselves on all levels and is a gift we give to ourselves and to all of life.

As Lao Tsou said:

" A journey of a thousand miles starts under one's feet."

I wish you well on your journey...

Xenia Aidonopoulou
Alternative Therapist and Healer
www.wearestars.com

On my website this article is available in both Greek and English as is followed by an extensive list of links you can check out, so drop by sometime and have a look!