

Why do people become vegans/vegetarians? Survey says: all of the above

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CORVALLIS, Ore. – A growing number of Americans are choosing to follow vegetarian or [vegan diets](#), but their reasons for doing so differ greatly, according to a new [survey](#).

For some people, their decision to quit consuming meat – or animal products of any kind – stems from their opposition to killing or using animals for food. Others are seeking a healthier lifestyle and say they are concerned about chemical or hormonal additives. And still others [associate](#) red meat with heart disease, cancer and “mad cow” disease, among other concerns.

“There is no single reason why people choose to become vegans or vegetarians,” said [Peter Cheeke](#), a professor emeritus of [animal sciences](#) at Oregon State [University](#), who launched [the survey](#). “In many cases, their reasons are multi-faceted. But if there was a single reason cited by most people, it was the idea of becoming healthier.”

Cheeke presented the results of the survey recently at the [American Society](#) of Animal [Sciences](#) national convention in New Orleans. His interest in the topic is both personal and professional.

An animal [science](#) professor in OSU’s [College of Agricultural Sciences](#) for more than 40 years, Cheeke ran a couple of small farms and raised four children. Two of them are vegans, one is a vegetarian, and the other is a farmer and rancher who raises livestock. One son, Robert Cheeke, is a well-known vegan bodybuilder and co-author on the survey.

Since Robert Cheeke was speaking at numerous vegetarian/vegan events, the elder Cheeke decided to take advantage of that to launch the informal survey.

“The goal was to find out what prompted all of these people to become vegans or vegetarians,” Peter Cheeke said. “So we decided to take advantage of the people who came to these trade shows and festivals and learn their motivation.”

Over a two-year period, the Cheekes, along with Steve Lukefahr – a former OSU doctoral student in animal sciences, now at Texas A&M University-Kingsville – surveyed vegans and vegetarians in 14 states. In addition to their rationale for choosing their lifestyle and diet, the researchers tried to learn more about people’s background, including experience in living on a farm, participating in 4-H, or having pets.

They went to such places as the Northwest Vegetarian Potluck in Portland, Ore.; an animal rights conference in Los Angeles; the Vegan Thanksgiving feast in Logan, Utah; a vegan bodybuilding lecture in DeKalb, Ill.; and the Boston Vegetarian Food Festival in Massachusetts.

In general, most of the people who completed the survey were female, over the age of 20, and had little experience living on a farm or participating in 4-H projects. Most, Cheeke said, were strongly opposed to all aspects of livestock production. Almost all sought a healthier lifestyle.

This and other surveys should serve as a wakeup call to the livestock industry, Cheeke said. A 2008 study by the [Vegetarian Times](#) found that there were 7.3 million vegetarians in the United States, and another 22.8 million people who followed a “vegetarian-inclined” diet. Harris surveys have put the number of vegans in the U.S. at between 1 and 2 percent of the population.

“That’s quite a few people who for one reason or another are choosing not to eat meat,” Cheeke said. “There may be a bigger role for niche marketing of animal products, including organic meats and free-range poultry.

“Thirty or 40 years ago, the biggest challenge for the livestock industry was producing things more efficiently,” he added. “Now the challenge is healthier products and less-intensive production practices.”

About the OSU College of Agricultural Sciences: The college contributes in many ways to the [economic and environmental sustainability](#) of Oregon and the Pacific Northwest. The college’s faculty are leaders in agriculture and food systems, natural resources management, life sciences and rural economic development research.

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