

How Many Vegetarians Are There?

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A 1994 National Roper Poll sponsored by the Vegetarian Resource Group (VRG).

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Not an Easy Question to Answer

How many vegetarians are there in the United States? After "What do I eat?" this is one of the questions most commonly asked of The Vegetarian Resource Group.

At least once a day, a reporter, a student doing a paper, a market researcher, or a curious member calls VRG to ask us the number of vegetarians living in the United States. Americans (and we suspect also Canadians and other people in western cultures) worship statistics and exactness. Even though there will be one answer this week and another answer next week, people like specifics.

However, the answer to "How many vegetarians are there?" has to be given in general terms. We can relate the different pieces of information known and then the answer can be interpreted according to the specific need(s) of the person inquiring.

Unfortunately, statements are often taken out of context and repeated until they become truth. Because one person may be allergic to a certain food, people will then expand that to the idea that no one should eat that food. We caution readers not to do this. Please understand that in science and life, though we generalize to give us guidance, one has to look at the details of each situation, and then make a judgment as to what the answer is under those circumstances.

Changing Attitudes Toward Vegetarianism

The attitude towards vegetarianism in the last twenty years has certainly changed. In the 1970's and early 1980's when we did outreach booths, often people would ask us, "Why be a vegetarian?" We almost never hear that question now. Instead, people come by and say, "I wish I could do that." They are looking for information on how to eat more vegetarian meals. Working at a booth today, we often have pleasant conversations with lawyers, bankers, C.P.A.'s, construction workers, or men and women in motorcycle jackets with tatoos.

Proof of this trend toward vegetarianism can be found in the grocery store. Where Heinz used to be the only vegetarian baked beans available, now there are several varieties on the shelf, from Campbell's to store brands. As we previously informed our readers, Archer Daniels Midland and Green Giant (Pillsbury) are introducing the vegetarian (vegan) Harvest burger in about half the supermarkets across the country this year. Where before you couldn't find Mexican food, cakes, or breads without lard, almost all supermarkets now have choices which are animal-free. If you think back a few years, you will realize the magnitude of this change.

For those readers over age 30, could you imagine eating yogurt as a child? Did you even know what it was? Though probably not one of their best sellers, most stores in major metropolitan areas also carry tofu today. And some supermarkets even have their own brand of dairy-free ice cream.

Growing Demand for Vegetarian Foods

Businesses will supply products which customers buy. The changes that have been happening are due to the public's demand for more vegetarian foods. According to a 1991 Gallup Poll conducted for the National Restaurant Association, about twenty percent of the population looks for a restaurant with vegetarian items when they eat out. About one-third of the public would order non-meat items if they were listed on the menu. This twenty to thirty percent of people interested in eating vegetarian food is fueling businesses' need to add vegetarian items to their offerings. Any company thinking about introducing new products will need to look at this population.

For specialty products and options in restaurants and supermarkets, we can see there is a pretty hefty customer base. This is probably why so many businesses are jumping on the bandwagon to add meatless selections. On the other hand, this number is still far from the majority. That is why a fast food place may be hesitant to add a vegetarian burger, or why a centerpiece of an advertising campaign may still not be vegetarian oriented.

When making a marketing decision, a business will have to decide whether this vegetarian-oriented population is their customer base and if they want their business. If the answer is yes, they will cater to them. If the answer is no, they may make different decisions. In a similar fashion, though most of the population still eats animal products, many natural foods stores decline to carry meat because the purchase of meat does not fit into the buying habits of most of their customers.

Results of Earlier Polls

This twenty to thirty percent of the population interested in vegetarian foods is consistent with the findings of different polls. For example, in a Gallup Poll done for Hippocrates magazine in 1989, when asked to describe themselves, about 34% of people said they were a "chicken and broccoli type;" 12% "brown rice and vegetables type;" and 10% "pasta and salad type." Only 35% said they were "meat and potatoes type." Five percent were "burgers and fries type," while 3% were "pizza and soda type."

If you add the brown rice and vegetables people with the pasta and salad folks, about 22% would actually be looking for vegetarian items. This is close to the 20% figure in The National Restaurant Association Poll. If you note that only 35% were meat and potatoes people, no wonder food companies are adding so many new "light" options.

Yet on the other hand, the majority of these people with an interest in vegetarianism are still consuming mostly animal-based diets. So there are numerous markets for businesses. They need to figure out which market to concentrate on, and how they will reach it. For enterprising businesses, there is no question that there is money to be made by marketing vegetarian products if done in the right way to reach that audience.

Beyond Marketing

For marketing purposes, as explained above, there is poll information available about the number of vegetarian-interested people. But The Vegetarian Resource Group wanted to know how many actual vegetarians are out there. This will give us a baseline to follow trends over the next hundred years and more. Past polls have given some indication, but because of the way the questions were asked, we didn't have an accurate answer.

Most polls have asked people whether they consider themselves vegetarian. In a 1977-1978 United States Department of Agriculture Nationwide Food Consumption Survey, of 37,135 people surveyed, 1.2% answered yes to "Are you a vegetarian?" However some of these people also reported eating flesh during the three days on which dietary information was obtained. Recent answers from other sources have been around three to five percent or above. Vegetarian Times magazine reported 7%, or 12.4 million vegetarians, after asking people, "Do you consider yourself a vegetarian?"

These polls about the trends of the number of people being vegetarian are important because they indicate that there is currently a very positive image about vegetarianism. More and more people want to be called a vegetarian. The drawback in these types of polls is leaving it to the respondents to define vegetarian. So the answer is not really indicative of the people who do not eat meat, fish, or fowl and are actually vegetarian.

In one major poll, a question started, "Most people eat quite a lot of meat. But some people are vegetarian..." Another question stated, "During the 1960's and 1970's many young people got

involved with alternative lifestyles and activities. Regarding the following list, which activities did you participate in?" Among the answers were smoked marijuana, dressed like a hippie, or became a vegetarian. So another problem associated with past polls was how the question was asked. Certainly there was a bias.

VEGETARIAN RESOURCE GROUP FEBRUARY 1994 ROPER POLL

This Roper poll was a nationwide cross section of 1,978 men and women 18 years old or over. Individuals were interviewed face-to-face in respondents' homes. The sample interviewed in this study is a representative sample of the population of the Continental United States, age 18 and up -- exclusive of institutionalized segments of the population (Army camps, nursing homes, prisons, etc.). Validations were conducted by telephone on all interviewers' work.

Following are the statistics gathered by the poll:

Never Eat:	TOTAL	MALE	FEMALE	BLACK	INFLUENTIAL
Meat	6%	5%	7%	6%	10%
Poultry	3%	3%	3%	1%	6%
Fish/Seafood	4%	3%	5%	3%	4%
Eggs	4%	4%	5%	4%	5%
Honey	15%	15%	15%	20%	12%
Eat Them All	75%	77%	74%	70%	71%

Discussion of Results

Marketing purposes aside, The Vegetarian Resource Group wanted to find out the number of people in the country who are vegetarians, that is, do not eat meat, fish, and fowl. We already have an idea of the number of people who consider themselves vegetarians. In our Roper Poll question, we asked, "Please call off the items on this list, if any, that you never eat. Meat. Poultry. Fish/Seafood. Dairy Products. Eggs. Honey. Eat Them All. Don't Know."

Please note that the key word is never. Our numbers could be very different if we omitted the word never. Instead, our results were mostly as we suspected.

The most surprising aspect of our survey is that up to one half million people in the country may be vegan. That is they never eat meat, fish, fowl, milk, dairy, or eggs. It is astounding that this number could be so high in our animal-product-based society with daily messages to eat some type of animal product.

Please note that because this is a poll, and we could not ask every person in the country, we are not saying there are 500,000 vegans. We can have some confidence in saying there are between

negligible vegans and 700,000 vegans in the country. Rather than a specific number, what the poll tells us is that though vegans are not yet a major percentage of the country's population, there is quite an interest in veganism. The Vegetarian Resource Group has some proof of this since we have sold over 26,000 copies of our Simply Vegan book. However, remember these figures are not for marketing purposes, as many more people may have a vegan-style diet, but may not be strict vegans.

We can be 95% sure that 0.3% to 1% of the population is vegetarian. That is, they never eat meat, fish or fowl. This is much lower than the three to seven percent who consider themselves vegetarians, or the 20-30% who buy vegetarian products, but still a pretty high number, which translates into approximately one half million to two million vegetarians, as we suspected. Taking into account other polls we have looked at, we believe this figure as reflective of the number of people who never eat meat, fish, and fowl, and is probably accurate.

Though the number of vegans as a percentage of vegetarians seems potentially high, we have been warned against using the statistic in this way. Because of the numbers we are dealing with, at this time we would probably have to do a prohibitively expensive poll to really find out that information. However, our educated guess is that if you only define vegetarians as people who never eat meat, fish, and fowl, and vegans as individuals who never eat meat, fish, fowl, dairy, or eggs, there could be a high percentage of vegans in there (5%-20%), since most people don't fall into the never category.

About six percent of the population never eats red meat; 3% never eat poultry; 3% never eat dairy products; 4% never eat eggs; and 4% never eat fish/seafood. As would be expected, the figures for not eating these foods among "influential" people are greater. (Influential people being politically and/or socially active.) For example, while 6% of the general population never eat red meat, 10% of "influential" people never eat red meat. We suspect the "influential" category being a higher percentage would also pertain to vegan versus vegetarians. Among the leaders in the vegetarian movement we know, there is a higher number of vegans versus what might be in the general vegetarian population.

As far as numbers for never eating red meat, the percentages were pretty close between male and female, and black and white. The biggest difference was between the South (4%) and The West (10%); Conservatives (5%) and Liberals (9%).

However, the difference is not as great as you may think. You can't assume just because a person is vegetarian-oriented they will have a certain political ideology.