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How Often Do Americans Eat Vegetarian Meals? And How Many Adults in the U.S. Are Vegan?

By Charles Stahler

With numerous groups pushing Meatless Mondays, Tofurky Tuesdays, or other campaigns to cut back on meat one day per week, The Vegetarian Resource Group wondered how often Americans are eating vegetarian meals. To find an estimate, VRG commissioned Harris Interactive® to conduct a national telephone poll.

Seventeen percent of Americans stated they "don't eat meat, fish, seafood, or poultry at many of my meals (but less than half the time)," and 16 percent don't eat these foods at more than half of their meals (but not all the time). Thus, one-third (33 percent) of the country is eating vegetarian meals a significant amount of the time. That's in addition to vegetarians! This is good news for companies producing vegetarian foods. No wonder so many restaurants have added vegetarian options.

In a 2008 VRG national telephone survey, 40 percent of respondents said they often order a dish without meat, fish, or fowl when eating out. We don't care for the word "flexitarian" since almost all people consume some vegetarian foods, even if they are not eating completely vegetarian meals. However, the U.S. population that is very interested in vegetarian foods, though not vegetarian, appears to be between 30 and 40 percent.

HOW MANY VEGETARIANS ARE THERE?

Approximately 5 percent of the country say that they never eat meat, fish, seafood, or poultry, which makes them vegetarian. Approximately half of these vegetarians are also vegan; that is, they also don't eat dairy or eggs. Note that we had respondents select "I never eat meat, fish, seafood, or poultry" or "I never eat meat, fish, seafood, poultry, dairy, or eggs." Because we use the word "never" and give the definition rather than having respondents self-define, our numbers may be lower than other polls. We also did not ask about honey, which would most likely give a lower figure for the number of vegans.

METHODOLOGY

Harris Interactive conducted this survey within the United States by telephone on behalf of The Vegetarian Resource Group between March 30 and April 3, 2011, among a nationwide cross section of 1,010 adults (aged 18 and over). Figures for age, sex, race, education, region, number of adults in household, and number of telephone lines were weighted where necessary to bring them into line with their actual proportions in the U.S. population.

In theory, with probability samples of this size, one could say with 95 percent certainty that the results for the overall sample have a sampling error of plus or minus 3 percentage points. Unfortunately, there are several other possible sources of error in all polls or surveys, including refusals to be interviewed (i.e., non-response), question wording and question order, and weighting. It is impossible to quantify the errors that may result from these factors.

Given this information, we can estimate the percentage of vegetarians in the U.S. adult population, based on this poll, ranges from 2 to 8 percent. Several other VRG polls have reported an answer of between 2 and 3.5 percent. With sampling error, this poll would also fall into the range.

We don't believe we have enough information to state whether the number of vegetarians in the U.S. is definitely changing but feel comfortable that it is at least a steady 2-3 percent. If we use a past low figure of 2 percent and the higher figure of 5 percent from this survey, we estimate that there may be 5-12 million adults in the United States who never consume meat, fish, or poultry.

In a separate Harris Interactive online poll that The VRG did in 2009, approximately 3 percent of Americans were vegetarian. The past and present surveys used different methodologies, and thus, a direct comparison can't be

made.

HOW OFTEN DO AMERICANS EAT VEGETARIAN MEALS? (No Meat, Fish, Seafood, or Poultry)

6%	One Meal Per Week
4%	One Day Per Week
17%	Many Meals But Fewer Than Half
16%	More Than Half But Not All
5%	Never Eat Meat, Fish Seafood, or Poultry
48%	Estimated Population Who Looks for Vegetarian Foods

The needs of the individuals interested in vegetarian meals can be different. For example, food companies and restaurants should note that consumers may be looking for vegan, low-sodium, gluten-free, locally grown, organic, gourmet, kosher, or other selections. If developing a vegetarian product or offering vegetarian meals, they will need to do more research on their customers' food preferences. In addition, when considering products and marketing strategies, businesses should consider the special needs of vegetarians versus those interested in vegetarian meals.

PEOPLE WHO NEVER EAT MEAT, FISH, SEAFOOD, OR POULTRY

Male Female

5%	6%	One Meal Per Week
2%	5%	One Day Per Week
13%	20%	Many Meals But Fewer Than Half
15%	17%	More Than Half But Not All
2%	2%	Never (Vegetarian But Not Vegan)
3%	2%	Never Eat Meat, Fish, Poultry, Dairy, or Eggs (Vegan)

There is a misconception that more women than men are vegetarian, but it appears that the split may be pretty even. A larger difference shows up when looking at who is eating vegetarian meals one day per week or at many meals. Marketers still should note the greater potential among females who sometimes eat vegetarian meals.

PEOPLE WHO NEVER EAT MEAT, FISH, OR POULTRY (Total Number of Vegetarians and Vegans)

5% Total	5% Northeast*
5% Male	5% Midwest*
4% Female	4% South*
	5% West*

* The Northwest Includes CT, DE, DC, ME, MD, MA, NH, NJ, NY, PA, RI, VT, and WV. The Midwest includes IL, IN, LA, KS, MI, MN, MO, NE, ND, OH, SD, and WI. The South includes AL, AR, FL, GA, KY, LA, MS, NC, OK, SC, TN, TX, and VA. The West includes AK, AZ, CA, CO, HI, ID, MT, NV, NM, OR, UT, WY, and WA.

The proportion of the total adult sample who "never eat meat, fish, or fowl" is 5 percent. However, one needs to be cautious in interpreting the findings for male, female, and geographic locations since these are based on a small number of respondents.

PEOPLE WHO DON'T EAT MEAT, FISH, SEAFOOD, OR POULTRY AT MORE THAN HALF OF MEALS

ON PEOPLE AT MORE THAN HALF OF MEALS

16% Total	23% \$15,000 — \$35,000 yearly income
15% Male	17% Northeast
17% Female	16% Midwest
22% 55+ years	17% South
26% 65+ years	13% West
24% Retireed	

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