

Parents Fret Over Veggie Teens

by Denise Weldon-Sivi

Over the past decade, vegetarianism has evolved from a fringe practice to a major mainstream movement. According to a Time magazine poll published in July 2002, roughly 10 million Americans are practicing vegetarians; another 20 million have tried the lifestyle at one point or another.

Nowhere is this surge in interest more apparent than in teenagers. According to a national study by Teenage Research Unlimited in Northbrook, Illinois, nearly a quarter of teens consider being a vegetarian to be "cool." High praise from that age group. Exact estimates of juvenile vegetarians vary.

One Roper poll put the number of children who never eat beef, poultry or fish at 2%. That's probably low. A University of Minnesota study examining the eating habits of 4,500 teens, Project EAT (Eating Among Teens), reported that 6% described themselves as vegetarian. And, Stephanie Pierson, author of Vegetables Rock! A Complete Guide for Teenage Vegetarians, claims that 37% of American teens are trying to exclude at least red meat from their diets.

All of these numbers, of course, beg the question: "What do their parents think?"

Parental Concern

In general, parents worry. They worry about children getting enough protein, enough calcium, enough iron - even enough calories. Still, a more interesting question than what parents worry about is why they worry. A large part of parental concerns are related to the parents' upbringing. Raised in an era in which a balanced meal consisted of meat, potatoes, and one (usually small) serving of veggies, baby boomers often have difficulty recognizing that a veggie stir fry served with small amounts of beans or tofu is actually MORE nutritious than the traditional steak dinner.

Over the years, parents have also been fed a good bit of misinformation with those steaks. Much of this misinformation was unintentional; it reflects major gains in nutritional science the past two decades. The "eggs are good"/"eggs are bad"/"we're really not sure" theories exemplify how scientific opinions of nutritional choices have evolved along with the science of nutrition itself. The USDA's change from a 4 Food Groups approach to the recommended Food Pyramid also reflects major changes in what scientists know about human nutrition.

Other misinformation is deliberate. As Amy Goodman reported in the July 2002 "Politics of Food" radio address on Democracy Now, "The food industry spends nearly \$33 billion a year in advertising and promotion to persuade people to eat more food." Even if only a small percentage of that is targeted to meat industry promotions, the numbers are still staggering. Cattle producers

in particular also have a vested interest in publicizing those few studies that show beneficial results from meat consumption.

Do they lie? That depends on your perspective of half-truths.

By selectively publicizing those results that fall in line with its agenda, the industry does deliberately perpetuate misconceptions. Whether that's unethical or standard business practice really depends on the reader's attitude toward advertising practices in general.

Misplaced Concerns?

Some of the aspects of vegetarianism that concern parents really should concern parents. Others are simply red herrings that reflect the public's general lack of understanding of human nutrition.

The concern over protein is definitely a red herring. Experts note that humans require only 8% of daily energy in the form of protein. That amount is easily met by most vegetarians without planning.

Another red herring is the worry about planning complicated food-combinations to allow for proper protein absorption. These might stem from a complicated plan for combining foods promoted in Frances Moore Lappe's 1970's classic, *Diet for a Small Planet*. Like the basic four food groups, this plan was based on what was known about human nutrition at that time. Subsequent research has shown that planning food combinations is unnecessary.

Iron deficiencies are yet another red herring. The University of Minnesota study found that vegetarian children are actually more likely to consume adequate amounts of iron than their meat-eating friends. While the researchers don't postulate, this seems likely to be related to the fact the veggie teens are also more likely to eat two or more daily servings of fruit and three or more daily servings of vegetables. As a result of these dietary choices, veggie teens also consume diets higher in vitamin A, folate, and fiber.

Vitamin B12

One valid concern is over deficiencies is vitamin B12. That particular vitamin is needed for blood formation and plays a vital role in cell division. A long-term deficiency can cause serious problems that, in extreme cases, may include irreversible nerve damage.

Why the problem? B12 is the only known human nutritional requirement that cannot be met by plant foods. Thankfully, this requirement can be met by fortified grain products as well as yeast. Since the RDA requirement is very low (1/1000 of a milligram per day), vegan teens can obtain the full adult RDA with only 1.4 ounces of Nutri-Grain cereal or 2 teaspoons of Red Star T-6635+ nutritional yeast. In addition, this requirement applies only vegan teens. Vegetarian teens who consume eggs or dairy products will receive all the B12 they need from those foods.

Junk Food

The effect of junk food is also a valid concern. Not surprisingly, vegetarian teens are only slightly less likely than their omnivorous classmates to eat junk food. (They are after all, still teens!) Dr. Walter Willett, a nutritionist at Harvard's School of Public Health, notes that, "Being vegetarian does not necessarily imply that this is a healthy way of eating.

For example, the classical American vegetarian diet of coke, pizza, and ice cream would be worse than a healthy omnivore diet." His sentiments are echoed by most nutritional experts. Limited offerings by the fast food restaurants at which teens tend to congregate don't help. Many vegetarian teens sentenced to McDonald's and the ilk for school field trips and post-game parties find themselves reduced to gnawing on French fries or salad.

While the salad sounds healthier, with whopping additions of cheese and high-fat dressing, the fat content could rival the French fries.

Missing Concerns

What's interesting to note here is what parents aren't concerned about, but should be. Take exposure to the antibiotics and hormones used in beef production. Of the 36 million cattle raised for beef each year in the US, up to two-thirds are plumped up using hormones. Perhaps most parents are simply unaware of the facts and implications.

Vegetarian children are also slightly more likely to suffer from poor body image and to indulge in what the Nurse Practitioner journal terms "unhealthy weight control behaviors ." Obviously, these practices are not caused by vegetarianism, but parents of juvenile vegetarians should still be more aware of the tell-tale signs of eating disorders.

Too Few Calories?

Given the huge media attention focused recently on the problem of obesity in this country, readers could be excused for assuming this concern to be another red herring. Surprisingly, it's not. One of the benefits of vegetarian eating is that the meals tend to be fiber-dense and low-calorie. For the vast majority of American teens, this is probably one of the healthiest aspects of the vegetarian lifestyle.

However, a small contingent of teens may have difficulties meeting caloric requirements. For the most part, calorie concerns come into play for student athletes, specifically, those athletes involved in high-intensity, long-duration, or competitive sports. Most teens performing aerobic exercise use 200 to 400 calories per hour. However, high intensity workouts can consume 900 calories per hour or more. Female athletes can require up to 3,000 calories per day; male athletes up to 4,000. Thus, the small percentage of teens engaged in heavy exercise will need to add more calorie-dense foods to their diets.

Unfortunately, most American teens already get far more calories than they should. Thus, this concern is more often a blessing than a bane. Implications? Teen vegetarians are hands-down more aware of nutritional issues and are actually eating a much healthier diet than their

omnivorous counterparts. Study after study by reputable medical establishments has confirmed this.

Thus, while parents seem focused on what their veggie children are "missing", they probably should be focusing on the diets of their non-vegetarian children. While many factors may have caused this result, Harvard's Walter Willett notes that, "One important benefit of deciding to be a vegetarian is that this does make one conscious of food choices, which is valuable because we live in an environment where most food is really junk."

His conclusion? "A vegetarian diet can be completely appropriate and beneficial for children, including teens."

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