

More young people go the vegetarian route

By Mary Brophy Marcus, special for USA TODAY

Sierra Predovich pops carrot sticks and hummus the way most teens nosh on fries. Predovich, 17, of Redwood City, Calif., became a vegetarian at 13 and is among a growing number of children in the USA who are cutting meat from their diets, or at least cutting back.

There is not a glut of research and statistics on vegetarian children and their diet habits, but a poll by independent market research firm Harris Interactive in 2005 showed that 3% of Americans ages 8 to 18 are vegetarians — meaning they do not eat meat, poultry or fish but may consume eggs and dairy. That figure is up 1% from a previous poll.

About 3% of adults are vegetarians, says Reed Mangels, nutrition adviser for the Vegetarian Research Group, in Baltimore. But she says as many as 10% of adults consider themselves vegetarians, even though they may eat fish or chicken occasionally.

More options out there

Many nutrition experts say they've seen changes in the food landscape over the past five to 10 years that suggest a growing popularity of vegetarianism among young people. Families with herbivore children say it has become much less taxing to find kid-friendly vegetarian staples — such as soy milk, meat-free broths, lard-free refried beans and veggie burgers — in mainstream grocery stores.

"It seems to get easier every year," Mangels says.

A registered dietitian, Mangels is the mother of two vegetarian teenagers.

"We visit my parents in northern Florida once a year. When we first started going 15 years ago, we'd pack an entire suitcase with soy milk and other foods. Now I don't bring anything. The local grocery chain has a good selection of vegetarian foods, which is significant because it's not a particularly progressive community."

An increasing number of schools, camps and colleges have plumped their menus with more vegetarian fare, too, as have fast-food chains and family restaurants.

Multiple reasons

Hema Sundaram, a dermatologist in Rockville, Md., near Washington, was pleasantly surprised this spring when her 13-year-old daughter's overnight summer science camp at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore sent a pre-camp letter offering vegetarian meal options. Sundaram says Vidya and her 9-year-old brother Giri's private school, Sidwell Friends in Washington, also provides vegetarian entrees.

"In my grade, about five of us out of 100 are vegetarians," she says. "I feel comfortable going into the kitchen and asking the cook if the soup has chicken stock. There's a great salad bar, and they always provide us with pasta and a meat-free sauce."

Young people cite a host of reasons for going meat-free, such as personal taste, concerns about animal treatment, environmental questions surrounding livestock and the influence of peers and celebrities.

Predovich's choice at age 13 was influenced by her mother's best friend, a vegan who abstains from animal products, including meat, poultry, fish, dairy and eggs.

"She opened my eyes to the treatment of animals in slaughterhouses, and I didn't want to be a part of that," says Predovich, who enjoys cheese and eggs but has considered edging into veganism.

Many non-vegetarian parents worry whether their children are getting enough nutritious food when they avoid meat.

Kaayla Daniel, a clinical nutritionist in Albuquerque and author of *The Whole Soy Story: The Dark Side of America's Favorite Health Food*, says, "I do think children will grow better on a high-quality omnivorous diet." The mother of two meat-eating children says human teeth and digestive systems prove we were designed to eat both animal and vegetable foods.

Daniel concurs that it is possible for vegetarian children who eat fresh dairy and eggs to thrive. Her biggest concern is for vegans.

"Vegan diets often lead to serious deficiencies of vitamins, minerals, fatty acids and amino acids," she says, which puts vegan children "at risk for malnutrition, digestive distress, allergies and immune system breakdown."

Countering lingering concerns, a 2003 American Dietetic Association review of scientific literature concluded that well-planned vegan and other types of vegetarian diets can be appropriate for all ages.

"A vegetarian diet can be very healthy if it's done intelligently," says Elizabeth Turner, executive editor of Los Angeles-based *Vegetarian Times* magazine. "But when you cut out meat, you can't just fill that new gap on the dinner plate with carbs."

Myrtle McCulloch, an assistant professor of nutrition at Georgetown University's Department of International Health in Washington, says her key advice for parents of vegetarians, especially vegans, is to make sure they get enough vitamin B₁₂, which is abundant in animal products.

"B₁₂ is vital for the central nervous system," McCulloch says, and she recommends B₁₂-rich eggs and milk products as sources. For vegan children, who do not eat animal products, McCulloch advises serving fortified soy products such as tofu and soy milk.

'Honor your child's wish'

She says it is essential for vegan children to combine vegetables and grains to provide amino acids, which help build proteins that promote cell growth.

"Adults are in repair mode, but children are in growth mode," she says. "These combinations will provide proteins necessary for growth."

How a parent responds to a child's wish to become a vegetarian is significant, McCulloch says.

"Honor your child's wish," she advises. "If they have been turned off meat for some reason that bears an emotional issue, don't force them not to do it or it may turn into an eating problem."

"Their vegetarian phase may not be long-lasting, but even if it is, you can teach them to eat healthfully."