

Why or Why Not Vegetarian?

An HRC Research Primer (Covering the U.S.)



Report in Brief

This primer summarizes the available research related to people's primary motivations for and barriers against adopting a vegetarian or vegan diet.

The Bottom Line

A small proportion of U.S. adults (1-3%) are "actual" vegetarians or vegans, although about twice that number describe themselves as vegetarian when asked (see the HRC primer, "How Many Vegetarians Are There?" for details). Research on the motivations for both actual and self-described vegetarians and vegans finds that members of these groups select their diets based on multiple factors, usually including one primary motivator and one or more secondary motivator(s). The most frequently cited factors are related to ethics and health. Vegans are more often motivated by ethics than any other reason. The most significant barriers to vegetarianism and veganism are concerns about preferred taste, nutritional deficiencies, and convenience.

How to Use this Information

To create effective campaign strategies, animal and vegetarian/vegan advocates must understand the psychology and rationale of the audience they are trying to influence. In doing so, advocates will increase their likelihood of success; targeted marketing allows advocates to focus specific messages on those consumer segments most likely to respond.

HRC Information

The Humane Research Council (HRC) is a nonprofit organization dedicated to maximizing the effectiveness of animal advocates using professional, cost-efficient, and informative consumer and market research methods.

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Introduction and Overview

Vegetarianism¹ appears to be a growing trend among people in the United States. An estimated 1-3% of adults and 2-3% of youths are actual vegetarians or vegans who abstain from consuming animal-derived food products; the number of self-described vegetarians is slightly higher (estimates of the vegetarian population are more closely examined in the HRC research primer, “How Many Vegetarians Are There?”). Growth of the vegan and vegetarian consumer segments is a critical metric for both animal and vegetarian/vegan advocates; any reduction in the consumption of animal products means a reduction in animal suffering and/or deaths associated with food consumption.

Those who are engaged in animal and vegetarian/vegan advocacy are best served by understanding the basics of consumer psychology regarding animal consumption, including the motivations for and against choosing a vegetarian diet. Understanding both perspectives allows advocates to craft targeted campaigns to more effectively influence the greatest number of people. Similarly, an understanding of the primary barriers to choosing a vegetarian diet is equally important to addressing and alleviating the concerns of non-vegetarians through social marketing messages. Understanding this consumer psychology beforehand will give advocates significant advantage when developing strategies and campaigns to expand the vegetarian consumer segment.

Primary Factors Related to Choosing a Vegetarian/Vegan Diet	
<p>Motivations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Health • Preferred taste • Ethics – animal welfare • Ethics – environment • Cost 	<p>Barriers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nutrition • Preferred taste • Convenience • Variety of foods

Why Vegetarian?

Vegetarianism has been the subject of several research studies in recent years, including a variety that has focused on why people choose to follow a vegetarian diet. These studies, though conducted by a number of different groups across different geographic areas, have resulted in similar findings, lending credibility to certain conclusions about the vegetarian consumer group. For instance, most vegetarians tend to have multiple reasons for making this dietary choice, and this diversity of motivations appears to strengthen one’s conviction to the diet.

Because motivations for vegetarianism are so numbered, some researchers question the validity of surveys claiming to measure motivations for vegetarianism. Wilson, Wetherall and Butler (2004) argue that reasons people report for being vegetarian can be flexible and serve a rhetorical function. For example, vegetarians may sometimes emphasize health rather than ethics as their main motivation, in

¹ In this report, the term “vegetarian” (and all of its variations) represents both vegetarians and vegans. A distinction between the groups is made where necessary.

order to avoid being seen negatively by others (vegetarians who report ethics as their main motivation risk being accused of moralizing).

Research conducted by the Humane Research Council in 2005 found that even though participants were able to distinguish a primary reason for becoming vegetarian, most also specified other contributory reasons for their choice.

PRIMARY AND CONTRIBUTORY MOTIVATIONS FOR VEGETARIANISM *

Primary Reasons for Not Eating Meat (responses total approximately 100%)	% of Vegetarians	Contributory Reasons for Not Eating Meat (multiple responses allowed)	% of Vegetarians
To reduce suffering of animals on farms	30%	To eat a healthier diet in general	65%
To eat a healthier diet in general	20%	To reduce suffering of animals on farms	55%
Other	13%	To avoid antibiotics and/other additives in meat	30%
To eat preferred foods	10%	To reduce impact on the planet/environment	30%
To reduce impact on the plant/environment	10%	To reduce my intake of fat and cholesterol	28%
To reflect spiritual or religious beliefs	8%	To eat preferred foods	23%
To reduce my risk of cancer or diabetes	5%	To reflect my spiritual or religious beliefs	20%
To eat less expensively	3%	To reduce my risk of cancer of diabetes	18%
To lose weight	3%	To lose weight	15%
To avoid antibiotics and other additives in meat	0%	To eat less expensively	13%
To reduce my intake of fat and cholesterol	0%		

* Source: Humane Research Council, 2005; additional details for all of the research studies cited in this report are available to registered users at www.humanespot.org

Previous research conducted in 1998 by Rachel MacNair found that having multiple reasons for becoming vegetarian was common and important because it “bolsters the case for vegetarianism as further assurances from other peers is crucial to maintenance of the practice.” Likewise, a 2004 dissertation by Christine Garzia analyzed the motives of thirteen vegetarians and found that the majority of them had more than one primary reason for following a vegetarian diet. A recent survey by Cheeke, Cheeke and Lukefahr (2010) also found that “there is no single reason why people choose to become vegans or vegetarians”, and many people report multiple reasons. Based on the findings of these studies, it appears that multiple motivations for vegetarianism contribute to one’s ability to adhere to a vegetarian diet long term.

Ethics-Related Reasons

The two most common primary vegetarian motivators are related to ethics and health. A Harris Interactive poll conducted for *Vegetarian Times* magazine in 2008 confirmed the significance of food-related ethics for vegetarians; more than half of respondents noted it as a reason for their vegetarian diet. Other studies have differed somewhat in methodology, but in general they reiterate the long-standing importance of ethical motivators for vegetarians. For example, in 2002, Time/CNN found that more than a fifth of the vegetarians surveyed indicated that animals were the reason for adhering to a vegetarian diet.

Vegetarian research participants also indicate that environmental concerns can play a role in their decision to abstain from animal products. Although the environment (and related issues like sustainability) is sometimes specifically delineated in research, in other studies it is grouped into a broad category with related ethical issues, including animal welfare. While it is clear that animal welfare is currently the more important driver of vegetarianism, the media and the public's recent focus on ways to slow down climate change and "green consumerism" may lead to increasing numbers of vegetarians. Although not principal drivers of vegetarianism, concerns about hormones, antibiotics, contaminants, etc. also consistently show up in survey responses.

Health-Related Reasons

Health is also an important factor in the decision to become vegetarian; in fact, most studies conclude that health is the overall primary motivator for vegetarianism (though not necessarily veganism). This is particularly true if all health-related reasons are combined rather than separated into specific health aspects (the methodology and reporting varies by study). For example, the 2005 HRC study found that 20% of vegetarians cited general health as their primary reason for not eating meat. However, an additional 9% cited other more specific health-related reasons for this choice, including the desire to reduce fat and cholesterol, avoid hormones and antibiotics, and manage weight.

More recently, Harris Interactive for *Vegetarian Times* found that the desire to "improve overall health" was the most prevalent reason for following a vegetarian diet, with more than half of all vegetarians citing it as the primary motivator for their decision. "Natural approaches to wellness," food safety concerns, and weight were the other reasons mentioned. In other research, it is clear that awareness of food toxins and additives has grown considerably in recent years and its impact over dietary behavior is likely to continue to grow, due in part to the increasing frequency and publicity of animal-related food scares.

Moreover, research studies conducted over the past two decades show that the perception of vegetarianism as a healthy diet has become more common over time. A 1998 study found that those who adopted a vegetarian diet after diagnosis of a disease were older, and that those who adopted the diet for disease *prevention* were younger, often following the diagnosis of a problem in a parent or spouse (Jabs, Devine and Sobal). A 2003 study conducted in Australia found that the majority believed vegetarian diets had associated health benefits (Lea and Worsely). More recent studies, like the one conducted by HRC, show that vegetarian food choices are becoming more common among a variety of consumers, as more and more people seek healthier diets.

Other Reasons

Some less commonly cited reasons for vegetarianism include a preferred taste for vegetarian products (and an aversion to meat products), as well as cost. Although they were mentioned by vegetarians in several studies, these factors were less frequently cited than health or ethics, and for most people they tend to be contributory motivators rather than primary drivers of vegetarianism.

COMMON MOTIVATIONS FOR VEGETARIANISM *

Year	Source	Motivators	% of Vegetarians
2009-2010	Why Do People Become Vegans/Vegetarians? Survey Says: All of the Above	No single driving factor was reported for becoming vegetarian; for most it was a multi-faceted decision. If there was a single reason given it was usually health.	Unspecified
2008	Health, ethics and environment: A qualitative study of vegetarian motivations	Primary motivators were health and ethics, environmental concerns were secondary	Unspecified
2008	VegForum (cited in Fox and Ward, 2008)	Ethical reasons Health reasons Environmental reasons Aesthetics or religion	45% 27% 1% 27%
2008	Vegetarian Times Magazine	To improve overall health Environmental concerns "Natural approach to wellness" Food Safety Concerns Animal Welfare Weight Loss Weight maintenance	53% 47% 39% 31% 54% 25% 24%
2005	Advocating Meat Reduction and Vegetarianism to U.S. Adults (HRC)	To reduce suffering of animals on farms To eat a healthier diet in general To eat preferred foods To reduce impact on the plant/environment To reflect spiritual or religious beliefs To reduce my risk of cancer or diabetes To eat less expensively To lose weight	30% 20% 10% 10% 8% 5% 3% 3%
2002	Focus Groups on Vegetarianism (HRC)	Inhumane treatment of animals on factory farms	Unspecified
2002	Time/CNN Poll	Health Chemicals/Hormones in meat Taste Love of animals Animal rights Religion Concern for the planet Lose weight Reduce hunger worldwide	32% 15% 13% 11% 10% 6% 4% 3% 1%

COMMON MOTIVATIONS FOR VEGETARIANISM, CON'T *

Year	Source	Motivators	% of Vegetarians
2001	FOX News/Opinion Dynamics Poll	Stopped eating beef/meat (because of the threat of Mad Cow disease)	2%
1998	Vegetarian Resource Group	Health Ethics, environment, animal rights Taste Economics	82% 75% 31% 26%

* Note: for some studies in this table, primary motivations are listed (responses total to 100%); for others, the contributory reasons are listed and responses do not total 100% due to multiple selections.

Semi-Vegetarians

Research into vegetarian motivations is often complicated by the variety of dietary labels that are similar to 'vegetarian', but describe meat reduction rather than the elimination of meat. Some examples of these labels include semi-vegetarian, meat reducer, pescatarian and flexitarian.

In the past, research studies have tended to group semi-vegetarians together with vegetarians in their analyses of vegetarian motivations. However, recent studies indicate that these two groups may have different motivations. For example, Curtis (2006) identified that semi-vegetarians reported health (88%), taste (63%), weight concerns (56%) and ethical/political reasons (38%) as their most important reasons for vegetarianism, while vegetarians reported health (95%), ethical political reasons (80%), taste (60%), weight concerns (25%) and religion (10%) as their most important reasons. The major difference was that vegetarians were more likely than semi-vegetarians to report ethical/political concerns as a primary motivator.

A survey by Allrecipes.com identified the six main motivations people give for cutting back on meat consumption as: health (75%), cost (35%), concern with obesity (32%), better recipes available for meatless meals (25%), and environmental impact (19%). Baker (2002) found that meat reducers tend to have more similar motivations to meat consumers than to vegetarians. Both meat reducers and meat consumers were focused on achieving a healthy life resulting from pleasure or happiness and freedom, whereas vegetarians were motivated by well-being and inner harmony (with health being relatively less important). The authors concluded that meat reducers were not necessarily moving towards vegetarianism.

Why Not Vegetarian?

An in-depth understanding of the drivers of vegetarianism is important for advocates, but it is also critical to understand the *barriers* that prevent non-vegetarians from following a vegetarian diet. These issues have been explored in several studies, which in general have found that there are a few common and apparently significant barriers to choosing a vegetarian diet.

Health-Related Barriers

While health is a primary *motivator* for vegetarians, some non-vegetarians cite health as a primary reason for the *inclusion* of animal products in their diet. Vegetarians consider the omission of high fat, high cholesterol animal products to be healthy, while many non-vegetarians believe that abstention from animal products leads to nutritional deficiencies. This concern is particularly prevalent among parents, and it is interesting to note that even some vegetarian parents have these concerns for developing children. A 2007 *USA Today* poll found that non-vegetarian parents worry about adequate nutrition when their children avoid meat. Also, HRC's qualitative research identified the reversion of several female vegetarian participants to a non-vegetarian diet during pregnancy.

Taste Preferences

Many non-vegetarians also claim a lack of interest in vegetarian diets because they believe it will not satisfy their personal taste preferences or specific "cravings." During focus groups, for example, HRC found that participants commonly thought that it would be difficult to give up animal products because of either a passion for certain products (e.g., cheese) or cravings for others, such as meat. These preferences can be so strong that they will prevent some consumers from even considering vegetarianism, let alone actually trying the diet. On the other hand, there are also consumers who attempt a vegetarian diet, but ultimately fail after a trial period due in part to these cravings.

Related to the notion of taste preference is the current paucity of high-quality meat and dairy substitutes to help vegetarians compensate for these cravings and preferences. Although some consumers are willing to try these alternative items, many others claim that they do not fill the void left by including animal products in the diet². Additionally, these items are sometimes less convenient to purchase or prepare (in part because they are less familiar products for most consumers), and this inconvenience is yet another barrier to vegetarianism for many mainstream consumers.

Social Barriers

Finally, the influence of family and friends can directly and significantly affect eating habits. In particular, HRC's 2005 study found that these social influences were mentioned as barriers to both meat reduction and vegetarianism. In particular, participants noted the inconvenience of accommodating a secondary (vegetarian) diet while other members of the household follow a diet including meat. It is significantly more difficult for would-be vegetarians who are primarily around other non-vegetarians to deviate from their social norms, simply because it is hard for any person to be different. These social challenges can be enough to deter an individual from moving toward vegetarianism, and those who do make the switch to a vegetarian diet in a non-vegetarian social circle may risk alienation.

² 2008 research in Australia studied claims about taste preferences when it comes to vegetarian vs. meat-based products, finding that differences may be mostly perception-driven; see <http://www.humanespot.org/node/2915>.

COMMON BARRIERS TO VEGETARIANISM

Year	Source	Reason/Motivator	% of Non-Vegetarians
2007	Men and Vegetarianism: Motivations and Barriers to Becoming Vegetarian	Health concerns Negative impressions of vegetarianism Perception that vegetarianism results in a thin body type 'Militant' vegetarians acting as deterrents	Undefined
2007	More Young People Go the Vegetarian Route (USA Today)	Non-vegetarian parents worry about adequate nutrition when children avoid meat.	Undefined
2005	Advocating Meat Reduction and Vegetarianism to U.S. Adults (HRC)	Primary barriers are taste and health concerns. Other barriers include social influences, cost, and unease about meat alternatives	Undefined
2003	Benefits and Barriers to the Consumption of a Vegetarian Diet in Australia	Enjoyment of eating meat Unwillingness to change eating habits Belief that we are meat to eat meat Family influences Lack of knowledge about vegetarian food	78% 56% 44% 43% 42%
2002	Focus Groups on Vegetarianism (HRC)	Taste, accessibility, and variety	Undefined

Why Do Some Vegetarians Start Eating Meat?

Vegetarian recidivism is an important issue for animal advocates. According to a 2005 survey by CBS News, there are three times as many ex-vegetarians as there are current vegetarians in the US. The survey implies that 75% of people who attempt vegetarianism end up eating meat (cited in Childers and Herzog, 2011). However, this finding is contradicted by an exploratory study by the Vegetarian Resource Group showing that the vast majority of people who reported being vegetarian or vegan in 2006 were still vegetarian in 2009. A recent survey by MMR Research for National Vegetarian week in the UK showed that 10% of the population consider themselves 'lapsed' vegetarians, who began eating meat due to health and nutrition concerns.

Haverstock and Forgays (2012) compared the characteristics of current vegetarians and former vegetarians. They found that current vegetarians were more likely to have made a gradual change, joined a vegetarian group, and consider eating pattern as part of self-identity than former vegetarians. Current vegetarians also reported ethical motivations (animal rights, environmental, political values) and health motivations as more important than former vegetarians.

Jaime Hecht's (2011) research indicates that social issues are a large barrier to maintaining veg*anism. Hecht suggests that vegetarian advocates should focus greater attention on supporting current vegetarians in maintaining their diets.

COMMON BARRIERS TO VEGETARIANISM MAINTENANCE

Year	Source	Barriers	% of Ex-Vegetarians
2012	To Eat or Not to Eat. A Comparison of Current and Former Animal Product Limiters	Cravings for meat Preparing veg*n food too difficult Bored with veg*n options	54.9% 41.2% 35.2%
2011	Veg*n Recidivism: Why is it Happening?	Family Relationships/Compromise Identity Issues Gender Roles Labels Peer Influences/Social Networks Trend Participation	Undefined
2009	Motivations For Meat Consumption Among Ex-Vegetarians	Declining health Hassles Irresistible urges Social stigmas Shifts in moral thinking	35% 25% 20% 15% 3%
2006	Perceptions and practices of self-defined current vegetarian, former vegetarian, and nonvegetarian women.	Health concerns (weakness, fatigue, anemia) Missing the taste of meat Changes in living situations Eating well as a vegetarian takes too much time Nutritional concerns (e.g. not enough protein)	33% 27% 23% 20% 17%

Young and Vegetarian

A topic that is fundamentally important to vegetarian and animal advocates is the study of vegetarianism among children and teenagers. According to a 2010 survey by Vegetarian Resource Group (VRG), 7% of 8-18 year olds say they never eat meat, while 3% are vegetarian. The survey indicates that approximately 1% of youths are vegan, depending on the inclusion of honey. This number has been relatively steady during VRG's 15-year survey history, and it is predicted to remain relatively stable over the near future.

More recently, Teenage Research Unlimited has found that vegetarianism appears to be a growing influence for young adults. This research indicates that almost 33% of female adolescents and 15% of male adolescents consider vegetarianism to be "cool." Other research has identified related perceptions among younger audiences including the belief that salad-eaters were rated "more moral, virtuous, and considerate than steak eaters." Moreover, Roper's *CollegeTrack* confirms that about half of male college students and nearly as many female college students say that vegetarianism is "in." To these students, it is a positive label that denotes compassion, health consciousness, and trendy eating. Other specific reasons given for college age vegetarianism include environmentalism and concerns about fat intake.

Karen Hussar (2010) concludes that vegetarianism in children (ages 6-10) relates more to morals motivations, such as animal welfare, than to personal motivations, such as health. She also notes that this finding somewhat contradicts earlier research that young children are not capable of making independent moral choices. In fact, all of the vegetarian children included in the study gave a moral

reason not to eat meat (almost entirely relating to animals), where non-vegetarian children did not acknowledge morals at all.

The single most important barrier to vegetarianism among children and young adults is parents. Children and young adults are conditioned to follow the examples of adults in the household; when the parents are non-vegetarian, children are often entirely unaware of vegetarian options. Even in cases where children or teenagers express an interest in vegetarian diets, they are frequently denied the choice by their parents due to the perception that vegetarianism is nutritionally deficient. Inconvenience also becomes an issue when the child’s preferred diet deviates from the family’s primary diet. In general, children and young adults living within non-vegetarian households are often unaware of vegetarianism or denied the option of being vegetarian. When advocating vegetarian choices to children, it is therefore critical to also address the concerns of their parents.

COMMON MOTIVATIONS FOR VEGETARIANISM IN YOUTH

Year	Source	Motivations	% of Vegetarians
2010	Beliefs and Attitudes toward Vegetarian Lifestyle across Generations	Younger people (11-20) emphasize moral and environmental motivations whereas older people (41-60) emphasize health motivations	Undefined
2009	Children Who Choose Not to Eat Meat: A Study of Early Moral Decision-making	Animal welfare Parent practices Religion Taste Health	71.9% 15.6% 9.4% 9.4% 6.25%
2007	More Young People Go the Vegetarian Route (USA Today)	Personal taste Concerns about animal treatment Environmental questions surrounding livestock Influence of peers and celebrities	Undefined

More Information

OTHER RELATED STUDIES AND FINDINGS

Year	Source	Findings
2001	Commentary: Rachel M. MacNair	Multiple reasons (including health, environmental, world hunger, spiritual, aesthetic, anti-big business concerns) bolster the case for vegetarianism.
2001	The State of Mind of Vegetarians: Psychological Well-Being or Distress?	Two studies examining the psychological well-being and world assumptions among vegetarian, semi-vegetarian and omnivorous women, which finds that vegetarians are socially conscious people who have enjoyed improvements in health, psychological functioning, and quality of life as a result of the diet.

OTHER RELATED STUDIES AND FINDINGS, CON'T

Year	Source	Findings
2000	Eating Ethically: "Spiritual" and "Quasi-Religious Aspects of Vegetarianism	An examination of vegetarianism finds that to a certain extent it exhibits religious or spiritual themes in its ideology and underlying motives.
2000	Once You Know Something, You Can't Not Know It: An Empirical Look at Becoming Vegan	The decision to become a vegetarian or a vegan was made either immediately after a catalytic experience and the orientation to such a lifestyle, or subsequent to some period of learning.
1996	Attitudes Towards Meat-Eating in Vegetarian and Non-Vegetarian Teenage Girls in England (University of Sheffield)	Most vegetarian girls are generally against the killing of animals for food and/or the sensory properties of meat and blood; health was not an apparent reason for adoption of vegetarian diet among teenage girls.

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