

Doc Talk

By Dr. Veronica Naudin



Can a vegetarian diet be healthy for Teenagers?

Q: My 14 year old wants to be a vegetarian. Will this diet provide proper nutrients for her growing body?

A: This is an interesting question and illustrates an issue that I believe will become more common for teenagers. Approximately 1 - 5% of American adults are currently following a vegetarian diet. A recent health survey of adolescents suggests that 0.6% of teens are vegetarian. In this survey, 81% of those identified as vegetarian were girls. In my practice, it seems that there are many more teenagers who are moving towards a vegetarian diet for improved health.

What exactly is a vegetarian? There are many different categories of diets that are sometimes lumped into the "vegetarian" diet. In fact, there are some distinct differences between the different types. The strictest vegetarian is known as a *vegan* and does not eat any animal products. A vegan would not eat dairy products, eggs or honey. A *lacto-ovovegetarian* will include dairy products and eggs to their vegetable diet. A *semi-vegetarian* avoids red meat but will consume fish or chicken in moderation.

What are the health benefits? Most of the studies on health benefits describe the benefits for adults. These medical benefits include a reduction in adult mortality from ischemic heart disease, cerebral vascular disease, and other forms of cancer. It is also shown to decrease the body mass index or decrease the incidence of obesity. Hence, it appears that the diet is beneficial as long as it is a well planned out vegetarian diet.

What are the potential problems? Parents should be aware that a diet consisting of potato chips, soda, french fries, and pizza could be considered a vegetarian diet. However, it would not be a healthy diet. Teens who desire a vegetarian diet and lifestyle need to be provided some guidance on the basic elements of nutrition to ensure that their diet is nutritious. For example, a good source of protein needs to be identified and eaten. Good choices include lentils, whole grains and nuts. For lacto-ovovegetarians, protein is obtained easily from dairy products and eggs. Calcium is another potential problem because it can be difficult to obtain the proper amount of calcium from vegetables. Good choices include the

green leafy vegetables such as spinach, broccoli, kale, and bok choy. Finally certain vitamins such as Vitamin B-12 and Vitamin D and other nutrients such as iron and zinc can become deficient in vegetarian eaters. Thus, I always insist that teens following a vegetarian diet also take a multi-vitamin daily.

Will my child have changes in her overall growth? If the diet is thoughtful and balanced, most teen vegetarians will reach their anticipated height. In general, their weight will be lower than if they had continued on a meat eating diet. It is important to discuss with your child their motivation for becoming vegetarian. For most teens, it is a desire to have a healthier diet or a disdain for animal killing or simply because their friend is a vegetarian. A few teens, however, are vegetarian and are also hiding an eating disorder. If your child's primary goal is the lose weight with a vegetarian diet, it is a good idea to bring your child to your pediatrician and/or family physician who will be able to assess your child's current nutritional status and provide reassurance and guidance as to an appropriate goal weight.

Finally, I believe that the vegetarian diet can be healthy and nutritious to the growing teenager. I see no short-term or long-term disadvantage as long as the teen is given proper guidance on learning how to balance a vegetarian diet with the appropriate vitamins, minerals and proteins. If you have further questions, please discuss them with your pediatrician. In addition, the following websites will be helpful: www.VRG.org, www.navigator.tufts.edu, www.nutrition.gov, and www.eatright.org.

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