

Your Teen Gone Veggie?

Has your pre-teen or teenager decided to become vegetarian? Are you alarmed? Worried? Informed?

First of all, RELAX. Take the time to understand what your child has in fact decided to do. Often the decision to become a vegetarian is motivated by very positive issues—sensitivity toward animals, interest in better health, spiritual experimentation, or concern for the environment—all good things for teens to think about and explore.

Your child will be fine. He or she will however need some guidance and support, not to mention a trip or two to the health food store with you.

There are a few basic rules for you and your teen to remember:

*You will need to study and learn. The more strict a vegetarian, the more you and she will need to know.

*Try new things and go for variety. Remember, becoming a vegetarian is making a *change* in eating, not just *dropping meat* or animal products.

*Don't substitute junk for meat. Again, the more strict a vegetarian, the more you will need to experiment.

What is a vegetarian anyway?

Strictly speaking, “vegetarian” is not a correct term. Nor is “semivegetarian” although it correctly describes people who are dropping red meat only or who have chosen to only eat fish as a protein source. Maybe they could be called pollo-vegetarian or pescovegetarians.

A **lacto-ovo vegetarian** eats no meat, chicken, fish or seafood but does eat eggs, milk and all grains, legumes, nuts, and seeds. A **lacto vegetarian** is similar but would exclude eggs. A strict vegetarian or **vegan** excludes all foods of animal origin from his diet, including honey.

Almost any effort to decrease animal products in the diet has the potential to promote a healthier lifestyle, so I would encourage your kid's efforts, even if they do not fit neatly into a category, seem inconsistent philosophically, or are intermittent or short-lived.

Are there any potential problems with trying out vegetarian diets?

Substituting junk: Kids need to know that a diet of soda, cheese pizza, fries and ice creams will not promote health. Again, what replaces animal protein should be the focus of their learning about becoming vegetarian.

Calories: Because meats tend to contribute significantly to total daily caloric intake, vegetarian diets can sometimes be deficient for active teens. When this happens—and they get hungry—they may compensate with more “junk” food.

Calcium and Vitamin D: Even meat-eating teens tend not to get enough calcium in their diets. This is especially important for girls who need 1200-1500 mg of calcium per day. If teens are restricting or cannot drink milk or eat dairy products, the best bet is to drink calcium-fortified orange juice or to take calcium in tablet form. Tums are probably the cheapest and most convenient and now come in fun flavors(tropical, berry, mint...).

Iron: Meat, especially red meat is the most easily digested source of iron, but not the only one. Eggs, cereals and green leafy veggies have iron. It’s probably a good idea, especially for girls, who lose blood monthly and are at risk for anemia, to have their blood checked periodically if they are limiting iron sources in their diets. Again, supplemental iron is easy to take and inexpensive if necessary.

Vitamin B12 and Zinc: It used to be believed that these nutrients were not present in vegetarian diets, but smart vegetarians who eat a lot of whole grains, legumes(beans), nuts, and green leafy veggies get enough.

Protein: This is only a problem with strict vegans but there are numerous sources and forms of soy protein that can be eaten or incorporated into family recipes.

How can you be helpful to your child?

DO Get informed
 Try new foods yourself
 Offer to go to the health food store together
 Make one vegetarian meal a week for the whole family
 Try an ethnic restaurant together

DON’T Lecture your kid
 Worry
 Sneak meat into the “veggie” lasagne

Following is a list of some ethnic restaurants with typical vegetarian selections from their menus:

Chinese: bean curd in sauce—(that’s Tofu), broccoli with mushrooms, cold noodles with sesame sauce, Egg drop soup.

Turkish: veggie soups, many dishes with eggplant, humus, chick peas, interesting salads, and a fresh veggie casserole in tomato sauce.

Thai: sauteed mixed veggies, stir fry, rice and noodle dishes, many seafood options for those who eat fish and seafood,

Japanese: vegetable tempura, noodles with veggies, Yu-dofu (bean curd with dipping sauce), salads.

And of course the Diner has Greek salad—hold the anchovies. McDonald's has salads: if there is meat, ask for a freshly made one.

References and helpful resources:

Eat, Drink, and Be Healthy: The Harvard Medical School Guide to Healthy Eating. Walter C. Willett, M.D. (Simon and Schuster Source, 2001)

The Vegetarian Resource Group: www.vrg.org
www.fastfoodfacts.com
www.eatright.org
www.fitteen.com, exercise and nutrition site for teens.