

Health

September 2, 2007

Enjoying the benefits of a vegetarian meal

Eating vegetarian can have many health benefits.

The American Dietetic Association reports that vegetarian meal plans tend to result in lower rates of heart disease, high blood pressure, type 2 diabetes and some forms of cancer. People who follow a well-balanced, low-fat, high-fiber vegetarian diet also tend to have lower body mass indexes and cholesterol levels.

These benefits derive from the fact that a vegetarian diet tends to be lower in total fat, and vegetarians tend to eat proportionally more polyunsaturated fat to saturated fat compared with non-vegetarians. (Animal products are the major sources of dietary saturated fat). The staples of the vegetarian diet are fruits, vegetables, legumes, grains, seeds and nuts, and some vegetarians eat dairy products and free-range eggs.

A vegetarian diet can be a very healthful option, but it is important to ensure it is well-balanced. You could stuff your face with chips and chocolate at every meal and be vegetarian, but you wouldn't be doing your health much good. Some of the difficulties with following a vegetarian diet include:

1. Finding a good source of protein for each meal can be a challenge at first for vegetarians. Vegetarians or those who do not regularly consume animal protein need to be especially concerned with making sure that their diet includes the nine essential amino acids. Amino acids are vital for health and proper function in the human body. Protein from animal sources such as meat, fish, poultry and dairy products are called "complete" proteins, meaning they contain all nine essential amino acids. However, the protein from plant sources, except for soybeans, is called "incomplete" because one or more of the essential amino acids is missing.

A varied vegetarian diet means diverse proteins are consumed, and the amino acids in one protein compensate for the deficiencies of another. Examples of "protein complementing" to get the essential amino acids include beans on toast, a cheese or peanut butter sandwich, muesli with milk (soy or cow's), and rice with peas or beans.

2. You need to make sure that your diet includes enough vitamin B, iron, calcium and other vitamins and minerals. You may need to use supplements, add fortified foods or do both.

3. You need to be careful that you are not depending on carbohydrates to fill the gap left by meat and other animal-based foods. Foods rich in protein take longer for the body to digest and will fill you up, so a meal without enough protein will naturally leave a person hungry and can lead to overconsumption - usually of carbs. Consuming excessive carbs and sugars becomes a vicious cycle, since eating sugar tends to make you crave more sweets.

A vegetarian diet is, by definition, neither healthful nor unhealthful. Like any diet, it depends on the extent of your knowledge and how much care you take to eat foods in balance, get the right nutrition for your body and avoid overly processed foods and sugars. Vegetarianism comes with its own set of associated risks, but if you care enough to be a vegetarian, it's in your interest to give a second thought to your diet, take the time to get it right and do what's best for your health.

However, you can gain the benefits of a vegetarian diet, but not become a "full-fledged vegetarian," by trying a couple of meat-free days each week. Or you could eliminate one type of meat from your diet (like red meat) and see how you feel. You can stop there, or try eliminating another source of saturated fats.

Supermarkets, restaurants and fast-food outlets all are now stocking a wide range of vegetarian options. Many "meat-free" dishes still have the meaty consistency and are significantly lower in fat and calories than their counterparts. In addition, some great vegetarian cookbooks can help you keep meals interesting with some exciting meatless side dishes.

You don't have to be a vegetarian to enjoy vegetarian dishes.

Research appears to indicate that an omnivorous (meat- and plant-eating) diet may be just as effective as a vegetarian diet in terms of reducing risk of coronary heart disease - if the diet is low in total and saturated fat and contains plenty of fruits, vegetables and whole-grain cereals and small amounts of lean red meat (as in the Mediterranean diet).

So try an evening of whole-grain pasta, a good Italian tomato sauce, lots of vegetables and a sprinkle of fresh Parmesan cheese, or layer your lasagna with veggies, or make tacos and burritos with beans and veggies. Hold the meat and enjoy the benefits.