Becoming Vegan

by Amanda Glesmann

Becoming vegan is a way to live more consciously. By committing to a vegan lifestyle, you dedicate yourself to making compassionate, ethical choices—and reinforcing them again and again—in your daily life. Veganism improves your physical and emotional health, and reduces your ecological impact on the planet. It also improves and extends the lives of countless animals, birds, and fish; and redresses the great injustices, wastefulness, and environmental damage central to the farming and dairy industries.

Being vegan requires a commitment to mindfulness about what we buy, eat, and wear. It is a process, in which we make the best choices we can based on the information we have. The range of things to consider—beginning with essential information about nutrition, and extending to questions such as where to shop and how to veganize a pantry, medicine cabinet, or wardrobe—can be overwhelming, but the links collected on this page provide a starting point. Veganism makes sense in principle, but it's better as practice. So get started!

Getting Started

The Vegan FAQ: http://www.vegan.com/faq.php

Vegan Outreach: Why Vegan?: http://www.veganoutreach.org/whyvegan/

Basics of Vegan Nutrition (or, Nutritional Yeast and Blackstrap Molasses Are Your Friends!)

Studies of the nutritional status of vegans have repeatedly shown that well-planned vegan diets provide adequate nutrition—even for pregnant and nursing women, infants, and children. Anyone who eliminates animal products from their diet should pay special attention to their intake of vitamins B12 and D, as well as protein, essential fatty acids, riboflavin, calcium, iron, and zinc. (Iodine is also a consideration, but this is generally an issue only in Europe and in other places where salt is not iodized.) Meeting the recommended daily allowances of all of these vitamins and minerals is relatively easy, however, now that calcium, riboflavin, and vitamins B12 and D are routinely added to soymilk; and iron, zinc, and vitamin B12 have become common additions to meat substitutes.

B12

Getting enough B12 is THE dietary issue for vegans. B12 is essential for neurological health. Humans store large amounts of it, so deficiency is not common. But the effects of B12 deficiency can be severe; symptoms include a variety of problems ranging from tingling in the extremities to loss of sensation, paralysis, and changes in memory. Many of the symptoms attributed to senility in old age are actually believed to be result of B12 deficiency! B12 comes from bacteria living in the soil and in the intestines of animals, and gets incorporated into animal tissue and animal products (such as milk and eggs). Plants also draw bacteria (and the B12 it produces) from the soil, but it remains on their outer layers and is usually removed in the normal cleaning process. Historically, vegan diets were probably an adequate source of B12, but today our food supply is too clean! The good news is that the B12 requirement is very low—only 2 micrograms (or about 15 millionths of an ounce) per day. The best vegan sources of B12 are supplements, fortified foods (such breakfast cereals and some meat substitutes), and Red Star Vegetarian Support Formula Nutritional Yeast. Nutritional yeast can be a fun thing to cook with or add to prepared food—it has a somewhat "cheesy" flavor. Just one tablespoon of it provides the daily requirement of B12 for adults. (It's fine to have more than one tablespoon, but it's best not to exceed three tablespoons of nutritional yeast per day, if you plan to ingest it on a daily basis.) To preserve its nutritive qualities, nutritional yeast should ideally be stored in the refrigerator, or in cool, darkened place such as a cupboard.

Vitamin D

Vitamin D is important for bone health. Given enough exposure to the sun, the human body can manufacture all the Vitamin D it needs. Darker-skinned people and older people make vitamin D less efficiently than those with lighter skin. For light-skinned people, fifteen to twenty minutes of strong sun exposure (without sunscreen) three times a week is sufficient. Dark-skinned people, older people, and those who live in smoggy, urban areas or in locations where the summers are short should consider taking a supplement, or choosing Vitamin D-fortified foods (many brands of soy and rice milk now include it). If you use a supplement, choose one with no more than 10 micrograms of vitamin D; it is toxic in high doses. Although this fact is often obscured by dairy industry propaganda, cow's milk is not a good natural source of vitamin D—like soy and rice milk, it must be fortified (as all cow's milk in the U.S. is).

Protein

There is little reason for vegans to be concerned about protein. Soy products (such as tofu and soymilk) are excellent protein sources, as are plant foods such as grains, legumes, nuts, and seeds. Even vegetables provide some protein. The issue of protein quality (or food-combining to create "complete" proteins) once received a great deal of attention. The heart of the matter is amino-acid makeup. Foods contain various arrangements of 22 different amino acids, which are the building blocks of protein. The body uses amino acids from food to create necessary proteins such as enzymes, hormones, and muscle tissue. Many of these amino acids can be manufactured by the body if it has the proper raw materials; nine of them are considered dietary essentials since the body cannot make them and must rely on food sources. Plant foods DO contain all nine of the essential amino acids. While it is true that plant proteins are slightly lower in "quality" than animal proteins (because they are not as easily digested), this can be remedied by eating a greater quantity of plant proteins. Nutritionists agree that carefully combining proteins is not necessary. If you eat a variety of plant foods throughout the day, and eat enough whole plant foods to meet your calorie needs, your protein intake will be sufficient.

Essential Fatty Acids

Omega-6s and omega-3s are polyunsaturated fatty acids which contribute to good health. They are considered essential fatty acids (EFAs) because our bodies cannot manufacture them, and must draw them from dietary sources. Omega-6s are plentiful in most diets (vegan and non-vegan alike) since they are present in common cooking oils. Other sources include seeds (sunflower, hemp, safflower, grape, pumpkin, sesame); nuts (walnuts,

butternuts), corn; soybeans; and oils extracted from these foods. Sources of omega-3s are less pervasive, so it is important to plan to incorporate them in a vegan diet. The health benefits of EFAs—and especially omega-3s, which are less commonly found in the omnivore diet as well—are still being explored. So far, researchers have linked omega-3s (which are plentiful in many fish) to muscle and joint health, immune system strength, and the prevention of heart disease. They are also considered to have powerful antioxidant properties.

Vegan sources of omega-3s include green leaves of plants (dark leafy vegetables, broccoli); seaweed; selected seeds (flax, chia, hemp, canola); nuts (walnuts, butternuts); soybeans; and oils extracted from these foods. It is recommended that vegans regularly supplement their diets with flax seed oil and/or ground flax seeds. Two tablespoons of flaxseed oil (or two tablespoons of the flax seeds themselves--ground or whole) provides 114% of the recommended daily allowance of omega-3s. (Two tablespoons of canola oil provides only 22% of the RDA.)

Riboflavin

Also known as B2, riboflavin supports normal vision, skin health, and a healthy metabolism. 1 ½ tsp. of nutritional yeast provides the recommended daily allowance (RDA). Many soymilks and cereals are fortified with riboflavin; other sources include leafy green vegetables, sea vegetables, asparagus, mushrooms, sweet potatoes, legumes, peas, almonds, bananas, whole grains, breads, cereals, and other grain products. Riboflavin can be destroyed by light, so it's a good idea to store riboflavin-rich foods (such as nutritional yeast) in dark glass or opaque containers, in a cupboard, or, best of all, in the refrigerator.

Calcium

Protein causes calcium to be excreted from the body, so it is likely that vegans need less calcium than those with meat and dairy-centric diets. (This also means that milk, as a rich source of protein, is not actually a particularly good source of calcium!) Nevertheless, it is important for vegans—and especially vegan women—to ensure they meet recommended daily calcium allowances (even though such recommendations are based on a higher-protein, omnivore diet) EVERY DAY. For awhile, nutritionists believed that calcium from plant foods was not well-absorbed, but studies from Purdue University have proven that to be untrue. In fact, calcium from plant foods is very well absorbed—in some cases better than

the calcium from cow's milk. Leafy green vegetables (such as kale and collard, mustard, and turnip greens) are excellent calcium sources, as are calcium-set tofu, calcium-fortified soymilk, and blackstrap molasses (one tablespoon of blackstrap molasses provides close to 20% of the U.S. RDA!). And remember, vitamin D is essential for calcium absorption, so be sure to get enough of both.

Iron

Because dairy foods are deficient in iron and may inhibit iron absorption, vegan diets are actually higher in iron than both lacto-ovo vegetarian diets and omnivore diets. Iron is plentiful in vegetables, legumes, and grains, and many foods are fortified with iron. There is plenty of iron in a plant-based diet—the issue is how much of it gets absorbed. Contrary to popular belief, spinach, swiss chard, and beet greens are NOT good sources of iron—they are high in oxalates, meaning that the iron they contain is in a bound form which is difficult for the body to break down and absorb. Iron absorption can be increased by combining iron-rich foods with those high in Vitamin C. Nutritionists recommend that those with low iron status drink water (or, best of all, citrus or vitamin-C fortified juices) when consuming iron-rich foods, and avoid drinking black or green teas with meals, since they contain tannins that limit iron absorption. Lack of iron is the most common nutritional deficiency in the U.S.; if in doubt, have your iron levels checked. A tablespoon of blackstrap molasses can be an excellent (and tasty) daily source of iron, since it provides the nutrient in easily-assimilated carbohydrate form. One tablespoon provides nearly 20% of the RDA of iron, and nearly the same percentage of the RDA of calcium.

Zinc

Zinc is a component of at least 60, and perhaps several hundred enzyme systems. It is necessary for cell generation, the elimination of carbon dioxide, respiration, wound healing, and a healthy immune system. It also builds protein, blood, and genetic material, and plays a part in our ability to taste. Children are particularly vulnerable to zinc deficiency. Zinc is found in grains and legumes (especially when sprouted), as well as nuts, seeds, and fermented foods (such as soyfoods like tempeh, miso, and natto). Additionally, many processed foods are now commonly fortified with zinc.

The Great Soy Debate (yes, it's safe):
http://www.veganhealth.org/articles/soy
http://www.babyzone.com/askanexpert/answer.asp?qid=29564
http://www.compassionatecooks.com/all_about_soy.htm

Ditch Dairy! http://health.msn.com/centers/cholesterol/articlepage.aspx?cp-documentid=100153762&GT1=9087

Honey: Many vegans avoid honey because they consider it to belong to the bees (a parallel to the belief that milk is produced by and for cows, not for human consumption). Other vegans avoid honey because bees are typically injured or killed during honey collection, and because many farmers burn their hives at the end of each year (honey bees are most productive during their first one or two years of life).

http://www.vegsource.com/jo/qa/qahoney.htm/

Sugar: Some vegans avoid white cane sugar because a small percentage of cane sugar is filtered using charred animal bone. (Beet sugar never uses bone char filtration.) If you want to avoid white sugar you can use organic unbleached sugar crystals--available in most grocery and healthfood stores--to replace sugar in any recipe. Organic natural brown sugar and powdered sugar are also available. For more on the sugar issue, see:
http://www.vegfamily.com/articles/sugar.htm
http://www.vegsource.com/jo/qa/qasugar.htm

Vitamins: Be sure that you are using "vegetarian" vitamins (drawn from non-animal sources and free of animal-based "binders" like gelatin). They are available in most healthfood stores, or online at sites such as Vegetarian Vitamin:
http://www.vegetarianvitamin.com/index.php/

Recommended reading

Animal Liberation by Peter Singer Copyright © 1975 ISBN: 978-0-06-001157-4
To Cherish All Life by Roshi Philip Kapleau Copyright © 1981 ISBN: 0-94-306-00-X

What to Eat

I Can't Believe It's Vegan!: http://www.peta.org/accidentallyVegan/

Reading Grocery Store Labels: http://www.vegblog.org/archive/2007/02/01/tips-for-beginning-vegans-label-reading/

VegCooking: http://www.vegcooking.com/

VegWeb: http://vegweb.com/

Post Punk Kitchen: http://www.theppk.com/ (FANTASTIC recipe archive!)

Vegan Yum: http://www.pakupaku.info/

Vegan Lunchbox: http://veganlunchbox.blogspot.com/ (Check out "shmooed food"—a selection of Vegan Lunchbox recipes)

The Veggie Table: http://www.theveggietable.com/

What to Wear

Clothing guide from Vegan for Life:
http://www.veganforlife.org/clothing.htm

Where to Shop (online!)

FOOD:

Food Fight!: http://www.foodfightgrocery.com/
Vegan.com grocery: http://grocery.vegan.com/
Goldmine Natural Foods: http://www.goldminenaturalfood.com/
Diamond Organics: http://www.diamondorganics.com/

HOUSEHOLD & CLOTHING:

Vegan Essentials: http://www.veganessentials.com/
Natural Essentials: http://www.natural-lifestyle.com/
Vegan Unlimited: http://www.veganunlimited.com/index.html
Pangea: The Vegan Store: http://www.veganstore.com/index.html
MooShoes: http://www.mooshoes.com/
Vegetarian Belts: http://www.vegetarianbelts.com/red_planet.html

Conscious Consumer: http://www.newdream.org/consumer/marketplace.php
Holistic Beauty: http://www.holisticbeauty.net/

Vegan Resources

SuperVegan: http://www.supervegan.com/
and, Super Vegan's Vegan Web Directory: http://supervegan.com/links.php

Erik Marcus's Vegan.com:
http://vegan.com/

PETA: http://www.peta.org/
Take the Veg Pledge, and/or get a free vegetarian starter kit!

Vegan Freaks (Being Vegan in a non-vegan world):
http://www.veganfreaks.org/

Veg Blog: http://www.vegblog.org/

Grassroots Veganism with Jo Stepaniak resource page. Ask Jo!:
http://www.vegsource.com/jo/

Vegetarian Resource Group: http://www.vrg.org/index.htm

Compassion Over Killing: http://www.cok.net/

Saving Animals — One Meal at a Time:
http://www.compassionatecooks.com/index.htm

FURTHER READING

Vegan Nutrition:
--Joanne Stepaniak, THE VEGAN SOURCEBOOK
--Brenda Davis and Vesanto Melina, BECOMING VEGAN: THE COMPLETE GUIDE TO ADOPTING A HEALTHY PLANT-BASED DIET. (Includes comprehensive information on vegan nutrition for pregnant and nursing women, children, athletes, and the chronologically gifted.)

Cookbooks:

--Robin Robertson, VEGAN PLANET: 400 IRRESISTABLE RECIPES WITH FANTASTIC FLAVORS FROM HOME AND ABROAD
-- Isa Chandra Moskowitz and Terry Hope Romero, VEGANOMICON: THE ULTIMATE VEGAN COOKBOOK (2007)
-- Isa Chandra Moskowitz, VEGAN WITH A VENGEANCE: OVER 150 DELICIOUS, CHEAP, ANIMAL-FREE RECIPES THAT ROCK
--Isa Chandra Moskowitz and Terry Hope Romero, VEGAN CUPCAKES TAKE OVER THE WORLD: 75 DAIRY-FREE RECIPES FOR CUPCAKES THAT RULE
--Sarah Kramer, LA DOLCE VEGAN: VEGAN LIVIN' MADE EASY

General:

--Erik Marcus, VEGAN: THE NEW ETHICS OF EATING. (Downloadable as a free pdf from his vegan.com site: http://www.vegan.com/)
--John Robbins, THE FOOD REVOLUTION: HOW YOUR DIET CAN HELP SAVE YOUR LIFE AND THE WORLD
http://www.foodrevolution.org/food_revolution.htm

Herbivore Magazine: http://herbivoreclothing.com/magazine.page.html

Satya: http://www.satyamag.com/