

FAQ ON VEGETARIAN DIETS

This answer is brought to you by many of the Australian nutrition professionals who regularly contribute to a nutrition email discussion group.

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SUMMARY ANSWER

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In this article the following definitions apply:

An 'omnivore' is someone whose diet includes red meat, white meat (poultry), fish, dairy products and eggs, as well as foods of plant origin. Most Australians have omnivorous diets.

A 'semi vegetarian' eats poultry and/or fish, dairy foods and eggs but no red meat.

A 'lacto vegetarian' consumes dairy foods but no meat, poultry, fish or eggs.

A 'lacto-ovo vegetarian' includes eggs and dairy foods (but no meat, poultry, or fish).

A 'pescetarian' includes fish and other seafood, but no meat or poultry (while eggs and/or dairy foods may or may not be eaten).

A 'vegan' eats only foods of plant origin.

The reasons for vegetarianism are numerous and varied. For some people, vegetarianism is an integral part of their religion or philosophy. Other common reasons include: a belief that vegetarian diets are healthier than the omnivorous (non-vegetarian) diet; moral considerations (e.g. 'animal rights'); and fewer harmful environmental effects, leading to increased 'sustainability' of the food supply.

With careful planning, semi vegetarian, lacto and lacto-ovo vegetarian, and pescetarian diets can meet nutritional requirements, and may even be associated with better health than omnivorous diets. A well-planned vegan diet can meet all nutritional requirements apart from vitamin B12, which must be supplemented in the diet. Vitamin B12 is found only in animal foods, and studies have shown that both vegetarians and vegans generally have lower levels of vitamin B12 than do omnivores. While it can take many years to become deficient, anyone following a vegan diet who doesn't include a reliable source of vitamin B12 is at risk of becoming deficient over time. If you follow a vegan diet (or you are vegetarian but don't eat many dairy foods or eggs) you should either take a vitamin B12 supplement or include foods fortified with vitamin B12 in your diet regularly (e.g. So Good soy milk, Marmite and some Sanitarium Veggie Delight products).

With respect to the sustainability of the food supply, there are sound arguments for increasing production of grain foods at the expense of meat in areas where soil fertility and rainfall allow grains to be grown. However, there are marginal areas where meat—but not grain foods—can be produced. The most efficient way to provide food for the world's rapidly increasing population may be to grow more grain foods—at the expense of meat—in those areas where this is feasible, and continue to produce meat in the more marginal areas. This would require an overall reduction in meat production (and therefore of meat consumption).

It remains to be seen if a predominantly vegetarian diet, with low-moderate quantities of lean meat and moderate quantities of low- or reduced-fat dairy products, will produce the best long-term health outcome, or if strict vegetarianism is the optimal strategy for good health and longevity.