

## [Do Vegetarians & Vegans Live Longer than Meat Eaters?](#)

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Ask your coworker or maybe a family member whether they believe vegetarians or vegans live longer.

Common wisdom (in other words, what you'll probably hear) dictates that when you eliminate "artery-clogging meat full of saturated fat and cholesterol," you reduce your risk for heart disease, cancer, diabetes, and pretty much every other disease on the planet. You might even save the planet itself.

You probably know the spiel. When you forego meat, you miraculously transform into one of those lean, blissful-looking vegetarians you see doing yoga or running along the beach in pretty magazines.

Plenty of people still subscribe to those stereotypes, but they might be dead wrong.

A big study published earlier this year in *Preventive Medicine* found a vegan or vegetarian diet can be *fabulous* for many reasons, but it won't help you live longer.

Researchers tracked 243,096 men and women (mean age 62). A six-year follow-up found no significant differences in all-cause mortality between meat eaters and folks who followed a vegetarian diet or some version thereof (including those who "flirt" with vegetarianism).

Even after adjusting for other factors like age, smoking, and a predisposition for Type 2 diabetes and other diseases, researchers found no evidence any type of vegetarian diet could help you live longer.

Other studies have yielded some similar not-so-flattering conclusions. Data from three cohort studies published earlier this year – this one also large-scale, involving a total of around 200,000 American health workers – found a vegetarian diet based on less healthy food options like refined grains could *increase* your risk for heart disease.

Upon closer inspection, researchers found those eating a plant-based diet rich in fruits, vegetables, and healthy fats were less likely to get heart disease than people eating stuff like potatoes, refined grains, and sugar-loaded foods.

In other words, whether you eat meat or not doesn't matter so much as whether you eat quality food *period*. Spoiler alert: Pretty much everything you need to know in this article is within that one sentence.

[Whether you eat meat or not doesn't matter so much as whether you eat quality food.](#)

Regardless of those and other findings, you probably have a best friend who ardently claims vegetarians and vegans generally live longer than meat eaters. Or maybe you have a coworker who has "tons of information" to support going vegetarian. You might have even been persuaded to go vegan with the recent documentary *What the Health*. (I actually was a strict vegetarian for over 5 years, many years ago, and at that time I was inspired mainly by the book *Diet for a New America* and some related documentaries.)

But, as with most things (just as much now, as it was back then), that argument isn't so linear or clear-cut.

*"It's not easy to know for sure what is the 'truth.' Vegan diet studies show they help with weight loss, reverse diabetes, and lower cholesterol. Diets high in fat and animal protein seem to do the same thing," writes Dr. Mark Hyman in Eat Fat, Get Thin. "Essentially, each scientist (or even each person reading the research) with a point of view adheres to his or*

her position with near religious fervor. And each can point to studies validating his or her perspective.”

## The Murky Science Behind Longevity for Meat Eaters compared with Vegetarians and Vegans

The studies I mentioned earlier, both from 2017 and reported in the mainstream press, concluded no, just because you’re a vegan and vegetarian doesn’t mean you live longer.

But other studies *do* show vegans and vegetarians live longer. You could take any number of perspectives to prove or disprove this among vegans and vegetarians versus meat eaters. Are they leaner? Do they have lower disease risks?

Longevity underlies many of these health concerns. After all, if you’re lean and free from disease, you’re likely to live longer. From that perspective, do vegans and vegetarians live longer?

Unfortunately, that’s an incredibly loaded question made more confusing by flawed research, biased reporting, and not accounting for other variables beyond diet that might also influence longevity. There’s a reason documentaries like *What the Health?* or books like *The China Study* cherry-pick research (called confirmation bias among scientists): If you looked at all the available evidence about a subject and even rule out faulty or flawed research, you’d have a 10-hour documentary or several-thousand-page book that would leave viewers or readers bored or even more confused.

That said, from a longevity perspective, you can compare particular aspects of vegan and vegetarian diets with that of meat eaters. Consider, for instance, nutrient intake.

A cohort study in *The Journal of Public Health and Nutrition* looked at 65,429 men and women between 20 and 97 with various dietary habits and backgrounds, including many non-meat eaters and meat-eaters. Researchers compared their overall nutrient intake and found vegetarians and vegans had the highest intakes of fiber, vitamin B1, folate, vitamin C, vitamin E, and magnesium. But they had the lowest intakes of retinol, vitamin B12, vitamin D, calcium, and zinc.

Meat eaters got some of these nutrients, but they also got less fiber (bad) and more saturated fat (good or bad, depending on the source).

Another study in *The American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* found vegans and vegetarians ate more vegetables and legumes and less junk food than meat eaters. (They also took more supplements.)

In other words, it might not be skipping out on meat that creates longevity; it could have been increased intake of nutrient-dense plant foods.

Lifestyle also factors in here. One study in *Social Science and Home Economics Journal* looked at the effects of lifestyle and food on chronic disease among vegetarians and vegans compared with meat eaters.

Researchers found meat eaters had more chronic diseases like obesity, hypertension, and Type 2 diabetes. Unfairly, higher saturated fat and cholesterol intake got the blame for this increased disease risk.

Yet meat eaters who practiced healthy lifestyle factors – they didn’t smoke, they didn’t drink excessive alcohol, they exercised regularly, they consumed plenty of fruits and vegetables – had results similar to those of vegetarians and vegans that also practiced healthy lifestyle factors.

From these and other studies, we can start putting together a more accurate picture about longevity. Other research finds vegetarians and vegans generally engage in healthier lifestyle practices than others, including meat eaters. (That doesn’t mean they *all* do.)

If all this sounds confusing, let’s use an overly simplified example. Put a chain-smoking, whiskey-swigging, Frankenfood-gorging sedentary vegan next to a meat eater who does burst training, sleeps well, supplements

smartly, and consumes quality animal foods like grass-fed beef. (Sorry for the stereotype.) Who would you put your money on to live longer?

From that perspective, one study in *The Journal of Public Health Nutrition* found little difference in mortality between vegetarian and vegans and those who consume meat. The meat eaters who consumed more fruits and vegetables, didn't smoke, and exercised regularly had lower mortality rates than those who didn't maintain these and other lifestyle factors.

Then you have studies showing consuming fruits and vegetables decrease stroke risk and lower ischemic heart disease mortality while increasing cardiovascular health regardless whether you eat meat.

Others show lots of fruit and vegetables along with regular exercise influence cardiovascular health, blood pressure, triglycerides, and cholesterol levels.

You get the point: ***Eating more plant foods and living healthier, not necessarily entirely avoiding meat, seems the smarter path to longevity.***

## Eating more plant foods and living healthier seems the smarter path to longevity.

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Beyond your diet, lifestyle factors matter. Good sleep, controlling stress levels, exercising regularly, and supplementing smartly complement your diet to reduce disease risk and improve longevity.

You can be a junk-food vegan or an incredibly healthy meat eater depending on the choices you make. Many of these studies look at conventional meat eaters, and the beef you get from a grass-fed steak is a vastly different animal than what you get from a fast-food cheeseburger.

Why not get the best of both worlds? Eating a mostly plant-based diet with high-quality animal foods provides an amazing way to get the gazillion compounds you can only find in plant foods along with complete protein and dietary fat animal foods provide.

## **So, You Want to Be a Vegan or Vegetarian...**

You've made your decision and nothing can change your mind. You're sticking with your values and avoiding animal products to whatever degree you deem best.

That's awesome. You're taking control of your health and your life, and you're honoring your conscience.

As a whole, studies show younger people become vegetarians or vegans for environmental, moral, and ethical concerns (that was me, in my 20s), whereas overall middle-aged adults do so for health-related reasons. That's a generalization, and people have various reasons for eliminating meat and sometimes other animal products.

While calling yourself an omnivore sounds pretty direct (you eat animal and plant foods), vegetarians and vegans are a murkier bunch. The most common types of vegetarians include:

- *Lacto-ovo vegetarians: vegetarians who avoid all animal meat but consume dairy and egg products.*
- *Lacto vegetarians: vegetarians who avoid animal meat and eggs but consume dairy products.*
- *Ovo-vegetarians: vegetarians who avoid all animal products except eggs.*
- *Vegans: entirely avoid animal products. Some even avoid honey because bees make it so it's technically animal-derived.*

Whatever "shade" of vegetarianism or veganism you decide, you'll want to address these concerns:

## ***1. Nutrient deficiencies.***

Vegans and vegetarians are often deficient in nutrients like **vitamin B12**, riboflavin, selenium, iron, zinc, and **calcium**. Sometimes they get too little protein or **omega-3 fatty acids**. (An algae-derived DHA supplement makes a great way to get those omega 3s.) Nutrient deficiencies manifest in different ways, including low energy and erratic moods. If they progress, they can lead to things like anemia or nervous system damage. That shouldn't scare you away from being vegan or vegetarian, but you've got to be vigilant about getting sufficient nutrients.

## ***2. Be aware of food sensitivities.***

As a whole, vegans and vegetarians often rely on soy as a source of protein, and this genetically modified (GMO) frequent offender appears in a ton of fake foods (see number three). The "whole-grain goodness" seal means you're probably getting gluten. Vegetarians can over-rely on **eggs** as a protein source. Especially when you're frequently exposed to these and other potential problem foods, intolerances can develop that lead to leaky gut, inflammation, weight gain, and lots more unpleasantities.

## ***3. Skip the fake food.***

Step away from the **agave-sweetened** whole grain cereals and soy-based Frankenfoods that populate most health food stores. Everyone gets lazy sometimes and wants convenience food, but make soy pizza, frozen veggie burgers, or tofu Pad Thai a regular thing and your health and waistline suffer. Focus instead on a wide variety of plant foods including fruits, vegetables, nuts, seeds, and legumes. You should be able to get sufficient protein from legumes, nuts, and seeds, but you might need to supplement with a plant-based protein powder or meal replacement. And please don't fear dietary fat. Because your overall caloric intake will probably be lower than meat eaters, you can incorporate avocado, **guacamole**, coconut, nuts, and seeds more liberally. These foods will actually help you stay full, as well!

## ***4. Listen to your body.***

Many vegans and vegetarians feel better initially, but over time they discover subtle or not-so-subtle signs their diet isn't working so well. Re-introducing animal foods might sound traumatic, but overall your health is most important. I realize this is controversial, since a few former vegans and vegetarians I've known ran into sometimes-hostile opposition when they started eating meat. (Some have actually become "closet meat eaters" having previously been respected for their veganism!) But to be open that *sometimes* a little quality animal food could make you feel better or alleviate your condition could improve your health. (Note to the meat-eaters: You need to listen to your body, as well! There may be times you'll want to go meat-free for periods of time while you evaluate your body's response.)

## ***5. Consider going mostly vegan or vegetarian.***

This is where we get the term "Plant-Based." Consider making the "most of your plate" with loading up on plant foods with a small amount of animal fat/protein. Or you might be a flexitarian where you *normally* stick with plant-based foods but occasionally eat animal foods when you, say, go to a dinner party.

## **Can't We All Just Get Along? Bridging our Differences.**

Meat eaters and non-meat eaters: I do believe we can cease putting everyone into overly simplified categories (like I did earlier). Not all meat eaters are cheeseburger gorgers, just like not all vegans consider meat eaters "murderers." I know we can stop those stereotypes and realize that a *lot* of gray exists between those two extremes.

I've talked about how to choose quality animal foods in this article. Quality also becomes crucial for plant foods, as I've described in this article about whether buying organic is worth the extra money. (For the most part, yes.)

Whether you're a meat eater or strict vegan, most health-minded people see food more similarly than you might imagine.

Yes, Google will reveal plenty of narrow-minded vegans and meat eaters, but the majority of us on both sides of the fence oppose factory farming, support organic non-genetically modified (non-GMO) produce whenever possible, treating animals humanely, and eating a whole food, nutrient-rich diet. Some of us also aren't dairy fans, and I've met a few vegans who adamantly dislike soy (especially soy Frankenfoods).

The main difference is whether or not we choose animal-derived foods, and even then, quality matters. Eggs make a great source of complete protein and healthy fats if you're a vegetarian, but the 99-cent-a-dozen variety you find in grocery stores come from chickens that lived in inhumane conditions and probably ate grain or corn during their short, sad lives.

Even there, we agree: Most conventional foods – eggs, meat, fish, and even produce – pale comparably nutrient-wise with organic, pasture-raised animals fed their natural diets and raised in their natural environment.

I like Dr. Hyman's concept of a Pegan diet: A hybrid diet that combines the best tenets of a vegan and Paleolithic (hunter-gatherer) plans.

*“Let's focus first on what Paleo and healthy vegan have in common,” he says. “They are both based on real, whole, fresh food that is sustainably raised; rich in vitamins, minerals, and phytonutrients; and low in sugar, refined carbs, and processed foods of all kinds. An apple doesn't have a bar code, an egg doesn't have a nutrition facts label, and an almond doesn't have an ingredient list. They are all real foods.”*

Finally, here's the take-home you'll find in most of my content: **There is no one eating plan for everyone.** While your best friend might do fabulously eating a vegan diet, you might feel tired, miserable, and puffy doing that same plan. Everyone responds differently and what ultimately matters is what works for *you*.