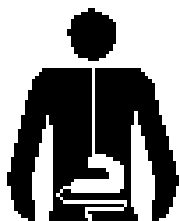


THE HEALTH OF VEGANS



When, in 1944, a small group of vegetarians became aware of the animal suffering inseparable from the dairy industry and decided to cut all animal products from their diet, their fellow vegetarians did not approve! They feared that deterioration in health would follow and bring disrepute on the whole vegetarian movement. Their fears proved groundless. A properly constituted vegan diet is now recognised, by all who have studied its effects, as not only adequate but in some ways superior to those with animal products. It is obvious that it must be superior to those involving products from cruelly abused factory farmed animals that are improperly fed and highly medicated to suppress disease symptoms.

For optimum health, nutrients need to be available from a wide variety of plant foods, freshly gathered from soils free from artificial fertilisers and uncontaminated with pesticides, herbicides and fungicides. A good proportion should be eaten raw. Factory processed foods, preserved, tinned, packaged with various additives to prolong shelf-life, and often transported long distances, should, as a general rule, be avoided. They adversely affect the health of both humans and the planet.

PROTEIN: Nutritionists no longer describe proteins from animals as 'first class' because they approximate to those of human tissues: this sort of reasoning can lead to the feeding of cows with sheep brains and the consequent BSE tragedy. Now a right balance of amino acids, the building blocks of proteins, is recommended.

If a minimum intake is recommended for reasons of economy of resources, eating a cereal, which is high in the amino acid methionine but low in lysine, with a bean, which has the opposite balance, helps this. It is interesting that subsistence farmers in traditional systems usually grow a cereal and a bean or pea. This probably came about because it was observed that pulses, which have nitrogen-fixing bacteria living in their roots, add to the fertility of the soil. The human health advantage was fortuitous - as is the popularity in our culture of beans on toast!

Generally, in most dietary systems, if enough food is eaten there will not be a protein deficiency. However, if enough energy providing food is not eaten, protein - which is more expensive to produce - will be broken down to give energy and its body building properties will thus be lost.

ENERGY comes from the sun and is made available to animals by the photosynthesising function of green plants. In the presence of sunlight the plants take in carbon dioxide and synthesise sugars, often changing them to starches and fats for storage.

The amount of energy foods needed varies considerably with individuals and according to their activities. Taken to excess, especially in the form of extracted sugars and fats, they lead to obesity and other ills. Fat intakes have been found to be generally lower in the vegan diets investigated and this is considered advantageous. It has recently been suggested that vegans should use soya and rape oils as well as sunflower and safflower. The variety of rape being recommended for growth in the UK is now free of the ingredient that once brought its oil into disrepute. Most vegetable fats are high in polyunsaturates; exceptions are palm and coconut.

VITAMINS, i.e. items essential for healthy body functioning, can, with the exceptions of vitamins D and B¹², be obtained directly from plants. Vitamin D is synthesised in skin exposed to sunlight, but humans evolved in the tropics, so for those living in climes with long winters and unable to take enough exercise in the sunlight, a dietary source may be necessary. The vitamin is now synthesised in laboratories. Vitamin D² is the type that has been made without the use of any animal products. It is added to vegan margarines and superior soya milks such as *Plamil* (which also has B¹²). These are justifiable processed foods because they meet genuine need.

Vitamin B¹² is essential for the health of every cell in the body. Women of childbearing age should be especially careful to get enough in order to avoid damage to any developing foetuses. B¹² is synthesised by micro-organisms widely active in the environment. It is abundantly produced in the human colon but cannot generally be used from this source because it is too far from the 'intrinsic factor', secreted by the stomach, with which it has to be bonded. Elderly omnivores, with plenty of B¹² in their diet from animal tissues, sometimes suffer from B¹² deficiency because their stomachs no longer secrete the necessary bonding chemical. They have to have B¹² injections. Warning signs of B¹² deficiency are swollen tongues and nervous tingling of extremities. General nerve degeneration could follow. This is easily treated in the early stages but, if neglected, could lead to death.

B¹² is now produced in laboratories from bacteria grown on plant material. This is added to many vegan foods. A teaspoonful daily of thus fortified yeast extract should give an ample supply. Yeast extracts are also rich in other B vitamins and are useful to flavour savouries, thus obviating the need for adding salt. Too much salt in the diet can be a hazard, especially for those with high blood pressure.

MINERALS. These come from the soil and are made available in all diets through the medium of plants, either directly or unnecessarily "second-hand" from animals. Concern is sometimes expressed by those approaching veganism about possible insufficiency of calcium and iron.

CALCIUM - for strong bones, especially important for young children, adolescents and lactating women. Good vegan sources are dark greens, nuts, haricot beans, figs. Vitamin D is necessary for calcium utilisation. Osteoporosis in elderly women is partly due to genetics and also to hormonal changes. Exercise and sunlight are important at all ages. As regards human diet, cow's milk is unnecessarily high in calcium. It evolved to meet the needs of calves, large boned creatures that mature in two years. There is only one food that is correct for human babies - human breast milk. Nearly all mothers can breast feed given the right help and encouragement. Fortunately this is being given in the UK now much more than it was a few decades ago. In the Third World, substitutes based on cow's milk are still being actively promoted by companies like Nestlé, out to improve profits. Often the mothers cannot afford to buy enough and do not have the facilities to prepare it hygienically, so the babies suffer not only malnutrition but also disease.

Allergy to cow's milk is widespread, especially among children, and can give rise to eczema, asthma, tonsillitis and gastro-intestinal disturbances. Among adults, "dairy products have been implicated in the causation of atherosclerosis and coronary heart disease, major causes of death in Western cultures. A causal link is not proven, but milk fats can raise blood cholesterol levels and may thus cause atherosclerosis; milk protein may cause an immune reaction that damages blood vessel walls. Milk free diets have been shown to be of benefit in

the treatment of some heart patients. Cow's milk contains low levels of many toxins and chemicals, such as pesticides, anti-biotics and teat disinfectants."

IRON. Good sources of iron are dark greens, nuts and whole cereals. Utilisation is said to be more difficult from plant than from animal tissues, but is aided by vitamin C - which is high in the diets recommended here.

FIBRE, absent from meat and dairy products, is high in the vegan diet. It is now recognised as protective against hardening of the arteries, coronary heart disease, diabetes mellitus, diverticulitis and cancer of the colon.

The best vindication of veganism is the obvious good health of vegans, especially those who have been vegan since birth and the elderly people who have been on the diet for decades. This has been corroborated by much scientific investigation.

In 1991, a 3,000 strong doctors group in the US, "The Physicians' Committee for Responsible Medicine" recognised the importance of the success of the vegan experiment. They recommended that the conventional grouping of necessary foods should be changed from *meat, grains, dairy products, fruit and vegetables* to *fruit, grains, vegetables and legumes*. They stated that "the typical Western diet, high in animal fat and protein and lacking in fibre, is associated with increased risk of cancer, heart disease, obesity, diabetes and osteoporosis."

Even more encouraging are the findings of an investigation involving many thousands of people in 130 villages through China. Most people in China, except the nomads of the far north, are vegan or nearly vegan, and have been so for generations, simply because there is not enough land for them to be anything else. The investigators were much impressed by the health of the peasants, especially by the absence of coronary diseases, anaemia and osteoporosis.

It needs to be emphasised that the vegan food of the Chinese peasants was locally grown by hand labour and without artificial fertilisers and pesticides. Hence it was different from the "animal free products" now on our supermarket shelves. Moreover, it must be admitted that it is excesses of typical Western diets that can cause diseases.

The early vegans were motivated not by concern for personal health but by disinterested compassion for cruelly exploited animals. It is now becoming clear that the health of the planet and all the creatures on it depends on phasing out the livestock farming that vegans have proved to be unnecessary and giving the vast acreages and resources thus released to trees. A future for our children depends on RESTORING THE FORESTS WORLDWIDE.

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