

# OPTIMAL HEALTH UNIVERSITY™

Presented by Katie Gravesen, DC

## Consider “Going Vegan” One Day Per Week

“Going vegan” is the new catchphrase, even though it was first coined back in 1944. In fact, many East Asian and Middle Eastern cultures have embraced vegan diets for centuries.

Despite these deep historic roots, suddenly “going vegan” has reinvented itself as the hip lifestyle of the millennium. Many of Dr. Gravesen’s patients are curious about this phenomenon.

What can the vegan lifestyle mean to your health, your family’s health — as well as the planet’s well-being? Read on to learn how cutting-edge scientific research is addressing these questions.

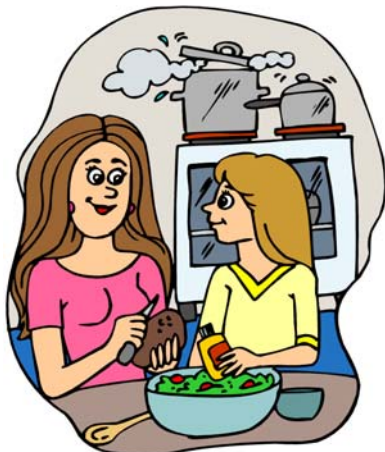
### What Is Vegan?

Vegans do not eat or wear any animal-based products. Vegetarians do not eat meat either, but they still eat dairy products, eggs and some fish; vegan people do not.

While Dr. Gravesen acknowledges that the prospect of a strictly vegan diet is daunting for most individuals, it is possible to reap many of the benefits of this lifestyle by going vegan as little as one day per week.

### For the Health of It

One study, which examined various dietary paradigms in today’s world, concluded that “diets largely based on



plant foods, such as well-balanced vegetarian diets, could best prevent nutrient deficiencies as well as diet-related chronic diseases. However, restrictive or unbalanced vegetarian diets may lead to nutritional deficiencies, particularly in situations of high metabolic demand.” (*Am J Clin Nutr* 2003;78:502S-507S.)

The findings showed that “recent scientific advances seem to have resulted in a paradigm shift: diets largely based on plant foods, such as well-balanced vegetarian diets, are viewed more as improving health than as causing disease, in contrast with meat-based diets.” (*Am J Clin Nutr* 2003;78:502S.)

Although this study did not specifically address the vegan diet, it does provide powerful evidence that living a plant-based lifestyle is a healthy choice.

Another study found that “animal-based diets discernibly increase the likelihood of both cardiovascular diseases and certain types of cancer. To our knowledge, there is currently no credible evidence that plant-based diets actually undermine health; the balance of available evidence suggests that plant-based diets are at the very least just as safe as mixed ones, and most likely safer for our bodies and



our planet.” (*University of Chicago Study* 2005;1-36.)

### A Question of Ethics?

Many vegans choose the lifestyle for its ethical merits. They feel this is a nonviolent alternative to meats produced under inhumane circumstances, such as factory farms.

### Go Vegan, Go Green

Others choose a vegan lifestyle for environmental reasons. Research indicates that plant-based diets may combat global warming. For instance, a University of Chicago study found that the “vegan diet is more environmentally friendly” than diets incorporating animal products. “The burning of fossil fuels [for meat production and distribution] and non-carbon dioxide emissions associated with animal waste contribute to global warming.”

When researchers compared the greenhouse gas emission and energy consumption resulting from five different diets, they discovered that a vegetarian diet is the most energy efficient (*Social Theory and Practice* 2002;28:135-56).

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Another study points out that the average American diet produces 1.5 tons of carbon dioxide more than a vegetarian diet. (A strictly vegan diet generates even fewer carbon emissions.)

According to these researchers' conclusions, "nationally this difference amounts to over 6 percent of the total US greenhouse gas emissions."

### Cents That Make Sense

Going vegan is also easy on the pocketbook because in the long run it can improve your health, elongate your life and "lower costs associated with healthcare." And, produce tends to be more budget-friendly than meats, packaged foods or prepared meals.

Researchers note that "there is ample evidence that people not only survive on such a diet, but that they thrive. The list of world-champion vegan athletes is impressive, so no one can honestly say that vegans can't achieve optimal health or nutrition." (*Social Theory and Practice* 2002;28:135-56.)

### The One-Day-per-Week Option

If committing to a completely vegan lifestyle seems too drastic, the one-day-per-week option may not. Going vegan just one day per week may help more than just you and your family; it may help the planet.

By making a commitment to go vegan one day per week, you and your family will ingest 35 pounds less meat per year, and that's good for your heart. You will also conserve water, prevent erosion, repopulate our ocean's fish stock and reduce fuel consumption. How is all that possible? "The industrial agriculture system consumes fossil fuel, water, and topsoil at unsustainable rates. It contributes to numerous forms of environmental degradation, including air and water pollution, soil depletion, diminishing biodiversity, and fish die-offs..."

It may be hard to believe that what we eat can have such a huge impact on the world around us, but current research is putting the responsibility for

global warming right on our own doorsteps, or in this case, our dinner table.

"Agriculture is directly responsible for about 20% of human-generated emissions of greenhouse gases, according to estimates by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change."

So while you may be driving a Camry or even a Prius nowadays, consider what is being driven to your dinner plate. "Fossil fuel energy is also a major input to industrial agriculture. The food production system accounts for 17% of all fossil fuel use in the United States." (*Environ Health Perspect* 2002;110:445-56.)

While going vegan may not be a life choice for everyone, consider committing to going vegan one day per week. Do yourself a world of good.

### Calcium Concerns

The vegan lifestyle involves avoiding food that contains any animal byproduct, including all dairy products, such as cheese, yogurt, sour cream and ice cream. This aspect of the diet may be a concern for those whose main source of calcium is gleaned from dairy.

Calcium is not only vital to children growing skeletons, but it is also essential for preventing osteoporosis as we age.

It's important that anyone following a vegan diet be aware that "many plant foods that are sources of calcium contain substances that block the body's ability to absorb the calcium."

In addition, scientists caution that many alternative sources of protein, "such as grains, nuts, seeds [and] cereals ... reduce the retention of calcium in the body." Even Popeye's spinach — despite being an abundant source of iron — may block calcium absorption by 95 percent!

So what's a vegan to do? New "calcium-fortified foods such as some cereals, soy milk products, and calcium-fortified orange juice offer op-

tions for those who prefer non-milk alternatives." (*Nutrition Today* 2000;35:4.)

### Ensuring Adequate Iron and Zinc

Iron and zinc are another concern for vegans. Popeye may have had the right idea with spinach, but for those of us who can't fuel up on spinach on a daily basis, supplements may be necessary.

As one study explains, "premenopausal women cannot easily achieve recommended iron intakes, as modified for vegetarians, with foods alone."

Researchers also suggest monitoring hemoglobin of vegetarian children and women of childbearing age.

Remember to consult the doctor before beginning any supplementation regimen.

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