

NUTRITION



Marina Augusto

IS A VEGAN DIET BENEFICIAL TO ONE'S HEALTH?

THERE are various reasons why people have adopted a vegetarian or even a vegan regime, which excludes all animal products. It could be for religious reasons, or due to animals fed on antibiotics and hormones, or for reasons of environmental sustainability.

More and more people have stopped eating red meat, others have stopped eating all kinds of meat but continue to eat fish, eggs, milk and dairy products, but there is also a large percentage who have adopted a 100% vegan regime, a lifestyle that has grown exponentially in terms of popularity all over the world.

Nowadays, it is known that a vegan diet can be of some benefit as far as health gain is concerned.

A vegetarian diet results in reduced levels of cholesterol and saturated fatty acids and, at the same time, is high in carbohydrates, fibres, antioxidants and phytochemical levels, resulting in many health benefits. In fact, scientific evidence has shown that a vegetarian diet is associated with a lower risk of chronic diseases such as obesity, diabetes, dyslipidemias, hypertension and certain tumors, all of which pose serious public health problems.

However, the planning of strictly vegetarian dietary

regimes should be stringent, in order to meet all nutritional needs. As animal products are not consumed in a vegan diet, this can lead to serious nutritional deficiencies due to a lack of macronutrients, such as proteins of a high biological value, and micronutrients, including vitamins and minerals such as iron, calcium, and vitamin B12.

Additional care is needed to make sure that a vitamin B12 deficiency does not occur. Vitamin B12 is very rarely found in vegetables, yet it is essential for the formation and proper functioning of the nervous and immune systems. To ensure the correct intake of this vitamin in a vegan regime, buy food that has been fortified with vitamin B12 (cereals or vegetable drinks) or through vitamin supplement. Particular attention should be given during pregnancy and lactation where additional vitamin B12 is needed.

When the nutritional needs of these essential nutrients are not guaranteed in the diet alone, nutritional supplements must be taken, in the correct doses for each age group, gender, level of physical activity and clinical condition. This should be supervised by a nutritionist.

Protein powder extracts from, for example, rice, peas, soybeans or hemp can be

used when there is a deficiency of these essential nutrients or as prevention.

Another very important aspect which cannot be overlooked is when the goal is losing weight; the diet plan will have to be very well elaborated so as not to exceed the ideal quantity of some macronutrients, such as carbohydrates and lipids, which may increase the number of calories in the diet and defeat the object which is losing weight.

Food should be obtained from healthy food sources, such as healthy fats (olive oil, avocados, nuts, seeds) and carbohydrates, in portions according to each individual's needs, while at the same time provide an interesting source of protein (legumes, lupins, quinoa, oat flakes).

In short, a complete, varied and balanced diet is the basis for a good nutritional success, regardless of each individual's dietary regime. A vegetarian diet can meet all one's nutritional needs as long as it is well planned to include a wide variety of food. Not forgetting the importance of a personalised follow up by a health professional.


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FOOD RICH IN IRON	FOOD RICH IN CALCIUM
Spices (thyme, basil, saffron)	Spices (basil, thyme, saffron)
Herbs (coriander, parsley)	Herbs (coriander, parsley)
Cinnamon powder	Cinnamon powder
Seeds (sesame, poppy, hemp, chia)	Seeds (poppy, sesame, chia, linseed)
Dried fruits (pistachio, hazelnut, walnut)	Dried fruits (almond, hazelnut, pistachio)
Legumes (beans, lentils, grains, peas)	Butter or almond milk
Whole wheat grains	Whole wheat grains (whole wheat bread)
Greenleaf vegetables (spinach, watercress, broccoli), beetroot	Greenleaf vegetables (cabbage, watercress)
Tofu	Tofu
To potentially increase the absorption of iron, food rich in vitamin C must be added to a meal rich in iron (kiwi, tomato, papaya, orange, strawberries, lemon).	Vegetable based drinks (oats, soybeans, rice) ideally fortified with calcium and vitamin B12.




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