

Choosing a vegetarian or flexitarian diet

By Christine M. Palumbo, RD - 12/19/2008

GOOD SENSE eating

One way to eat "greener" and reduce your carbon footprint is to eat a plant-centered diet with little meat. Some people eliminate meat or other animal products altogether by eating a vegetarian diet, a more popular choice than ever. Or is it? According to Harry Balzer with the NPD Group, a company that studies people's eating habits, vegetarianism is fairly stable at between 1.3 and 2.6 percent, depending on how people are queried. Other studies suggest that between 30 and 40 percent of Americans are seeking out meatless items more often.

Perhaps your family usually eats vegetarian but also enjoys an occasional burger, chicken breast or bowl of chili con carne. That eating style has been dubbed "flexitarian" and it is gaining more attention because it's less restrictive than a full vegetarian diet. Dawn Jackson Blatner, a registered dietitian who espouses this eating style, writes about it in her new book, *The Flexitarian Diet*. She cites a 2003 study of more than 13,000 people in the *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* that found that nearly two out of three vegetarians eat this way. Many former vegetarians add fish or meat because they feel they need more protein.

Benefits of a flexitarian diet

Choosing a flexitarian diet can give children (and the entire family) the opportunity to learn to enjoy a variety of delicious and nutritious foods. Children raised on fruits, vegetables, whole grains and legumes grow up to be slimmer, healthier and even live longer than their meat-eating friends, says Blatner.

Drawbacks? None. Flexitarians don't give up any food group, but rather just add more nutritious foods. Foods like black bean dip, lentil soup, bean burritos, cheese and vegetable pizza, barbecued tempeh, nuts (for children over age 3) and veggie burgers provide vitamins, minerals and plant chemicals known as phytonutrients that are associated with good health.

Can a vegetable-hating little one still be a flexitarian? Blatner, also a spokesperson for the American Dietetic Association, say they can. Children's palates can be trained to enjoy vegetables, beans and other healthy flexitarian staples. The key is to serve healthy foods in crowd-pleasing recipes such as veggies on pizza, low fat bean dip with chips and whole wheat pasta with the family's favorite sauce. Missing the meaty taste? You can provide that fifth taste—known as umami—by incorporating mushrooms, aged cheese (such as Parmesan), tomato sauce or walnuts in your family's meals.

All on board?

The flexitarian diet isn't about drastic changes, so every family member can easily be on board. Decrease meat (not eliminate it) in your favorite recipes while adding more beans and vegetables. For instance, cut back the lean beef or turkey by half in your taco recipe and add pinto, kidney or black

beans in its place. Or try making taco salads to get in more veggies.

Blatner says eating mostly vegetarian, but allowing for some meat proteins at times, has all the health benefits of a plant-centered diet without all the "rules." Your family may be "flexitarians" without even knowing it.

Dear Good Sense Eating,

We're meat eaters in our family, but our son refuses to eat meat. He says he doesn't like the texture or taste. Should I be worried?

If your son consumes a well-balanced diet that includes eggs and dairy products, it's easy to obtain adequate nutrition. If he goes all the way and adapts a vegan lifestyle, very careful diet planning needs to be done to ensure all nutrient needs are met, such as protein, calcium, vitamin B12, vitamin D, omega-3 fatty acids, zinc and iron. I recommend a consultation with a registered dietitian (www.eatright.org). The American Dietetic Association, together with the Dietitians of Canada, state in their position paper, "Well-planned vegan and other types of vegetarian diets are appropriate for all stages of the life cycle, including during pregnancy, lactation, infancy, childhood and adolescence."

Edamame Stir-Fry with Brown Rice

Ingredients

1/2-inch chunk ginger, grated
1 clove garlic, minced
Pinch of crushed red pepper flakes
Dash of salt
1 red bell pepper, sliced
2 tsp. sesame oil
3/4 cup shelled frozen edamame
1/4 cup 100 percent pineapple juice
1 cup cooked brown rice (precooked microwaveable or simmer your own)

Sauté the ginger, garlic, crushed red pepper, salt and bell pepper in oil over medium heat for 3 minutes. Add edamame and pineapple juice and cook for 8 minutes more on high heat. Heat microwaveable brown rice. Top brown rice with veggie stir-fry.

Flex Swap 1/2 cup edamame for 3 ounces of cooked chicken breast or lean steak strips.

Nutrition information: 485 calories, 15 grams fat, 2 grams saturated fat, 0 milligrams cholesterol, 327 milligrams sodium, 74 grams carbohydrates, 12 grams fiber, 16 grams protein. Recipe printed with permission from *The Flexitarian Diet* by Dawn Jackson Blatner, RD, LDN, (McGraw-Hill, 2008)

Christine M. Palumbo, RD, is a registered dietitian in private practice in Naperville. She can be reached at (630) 369-8495 or ChristinePalumbo.com.

Chicago Parent, Copyright © 2009, All Rights Reserved.