



You  
**Flexi**  
THING!

Do you pledge to eat veg – or cheat and eat meat? It's time to stop the denial, secrecy and shame – you can be a vegetarian and eat meat too. In fact, it could be the perfect diet. Welcome to 'the joy of flex', says Alex Gazzola



Want to call yourself vegetarian – and still enjoy the occasional salmon roulade? Want to eat one of the healthiest diets possible – without giving up pork sausages? The answer, according to dietitian Dawn Jackson Blatner, is to become a flexible vegetarian – or a 'flexitarian'.

Jackson Blatner's new book, *The Flexitarian Diet*, has become the bible for this new, balanced nutritional compromise. It is based on simple ideas: that no food is banned, that you should eat more plant-based foods, that it is a flexible lifestyle choice, not a fad weight-loss diet – and that you can declare yourself 'mostly vegetarian' without feeling the need to lie about, or apologise or feel guilty for, occasionally eating meat. The book boasts a 'plants protect people' philosophy and tasty vegetarian recipes with 'flex swap' options – variations which include meat or fish as an ingredient, for the times when you want, bluntly, some flesh on your plate.

We know the health case for true vegetarianism against carnivorous: vegetarians weigh less than meat eaters by an average of 15 per cent, they are less likely to suffer from cancer, diabetes or cardiovascular disease, and they live three and a half years longer. But where does the middle-ground of flexitarianism sit between the two? Do those life-giving benefits come from excluding meat, from boosting fruit and veg intake, or a mixture of both?

"This is a grey area," acknowledges Jackson Blatner. "Research into people who call themselves vegetarian has found that two out of every three eat meat anyway – so studies into the health of vegetarians already incorporates flexitarians to some extent. All those I've looked at suggest the fewer animal products you eat, and the more meat-free days you have, the healthier you are."

What has not been properly looked at, however, are benefits aside from the physical. "Vegetarianism is the healthiest thing for your physical body," stresses Jackson Blatner, "but cutting out meat often eliminates the psychological and social benefits of spending time with friends and family bonding over barbecues

and turkey feasts at Christmas and other special occasions. There are spiritual pieces of the puzzle involved in eating meat during meaningful celebratory moments in life."

Nutritionist Julia Alderman of The Nutrition Coach ([thenutritioncoach.co.uk](http://thenutritioncoach.co.uk)) agrees that, unless for ethical or religious reasons, vegetarianism and carnivorous need not be mutually exclusive, and that meat-reduction, but not necessarily meat-elimination, is a terrific way forward. The British clearly agree with her. According to market analysts Mintel's Meat-Free Foods Report of 2008, the value of the meat-free product market has increased by more than 20 per cent over a recent five-year period. This, they say, is down not to any rise in vegetarianism, whose growth is slow, but to carnivores

increasingly including meat-free foods as part of their regular diet.

"The Western diet contains far more protein than necessary for health and in evolutionary terms I don't believe that we are designed to eat the vast quantities of meat that make up many diets," says Alderman.

"Much of the meat on the market is processed, fatty and high in both antibiotics and growth hormones which have a detrimental impact on health – and eating meat as a regular part of the diet has an acidic effect on the body. I do, however, appreciate the health benefits of eating animal products

occasionally – especially oily fish which is the best natural source of omega-3 essential fats, and organic lean meat for zinc, iron and vitamin D. Therefore, for optimal health, including a small amount of high quality meat in the diet ensures you can get the benefits, without the negative effects."

Alderman, who describes herself as a 'fish-eating, occasional chicken-eating, vegan' feels quality not quantity is key – go for organic, wild or free-range meats and fish. Pure vegetarianism, she argues, leaves you open to omega-3 deficiency – difficult to correct with, for instance, vast quantities of linseed or hemp oil – and anaemia, also tough to remedy without eating meat, rich as it is in a very bioavailable form of iron.

## Flex tips for girls

- Make gradual, modest changes until they become a part of your routine.
- Have 'meaty' veggie foods if you're missing the distinctive taste of meat – try beans, soya foods, seeds, nuts, eggs, peas, lentils and strong cheeses.
- Consume all veggie colours – yellow, orange, red, green and purple – for a range of antioxidants.
- Vary your grains – even if you can't pronounce them all, experiment with barley, quinoa, rye, sorghum, millet, kamut, triticale, teff and buckwheat.
- It's fine to have a small amount of meat or fish with your vegetables – choose organic, free-range and wild varieties, avoiding heavily processed products.
- Don't deny yourself a burger at a barbie if it's what you fancy.



## The veggie view

According to a November 2007 Defra survey, five per cent of the adult population eats a largely vegetarian diet supplemented by fish and/or chicken, while two per cent is strictly vegan, and an additional three per cent strictly vegetarian. Clearly in a large minority, then, can traditional vegetarians really afford to 'shun' part-time members of the veggie cause?

"Obviously, it's fantastic if people want to eat less meat, but a flexitarian is still a meat-eater, not a vegetarian," says Liz O'Neill of the Vegetarian Society (vegsoc.org). "It's not a commitment and it's not a lifestyle, because a vegetarian chooses not to eat the flesh of a dead animal. Wanting to be a vegetarian and eat meat is like wanting to be married and be single too!"

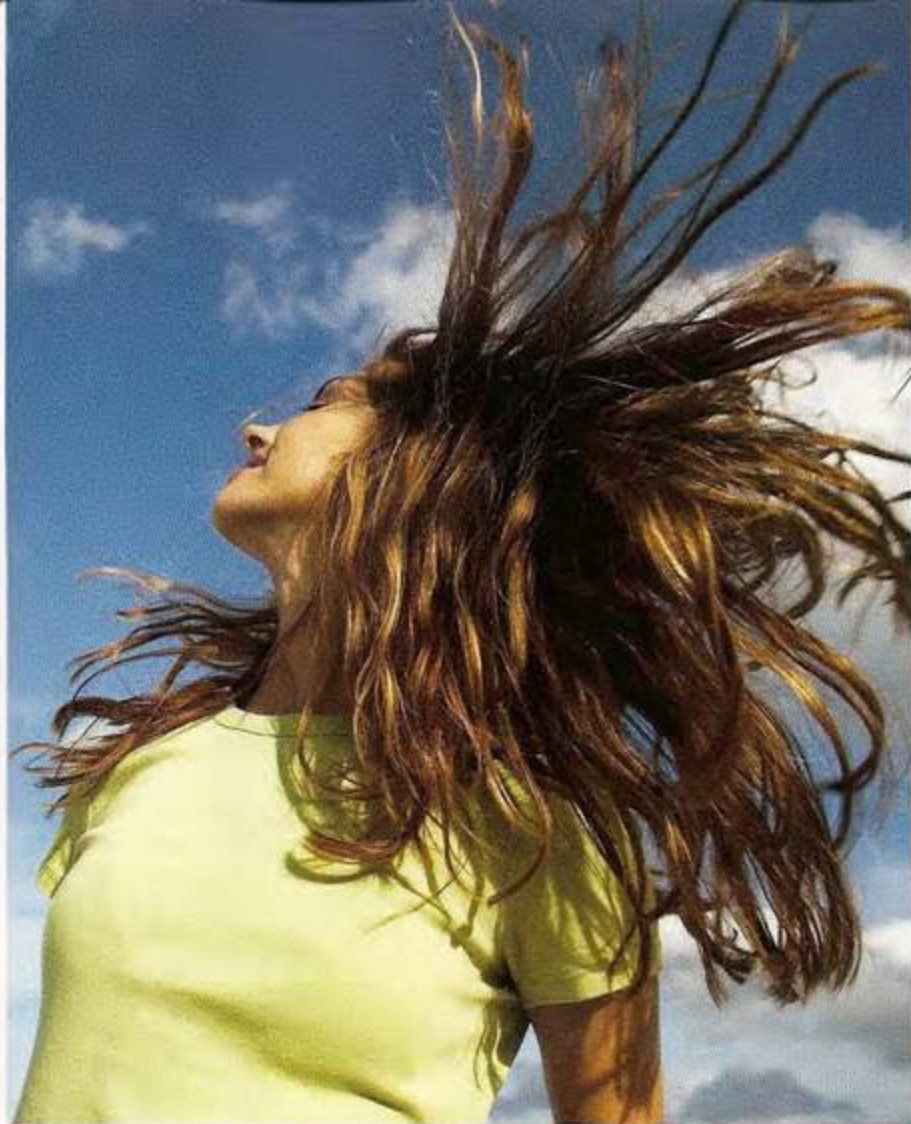
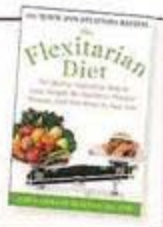
O'Neill is sceptical about the social and psychological defence in support of meat-eating – arguing that the more people who care enough to commit to vegetarianism, the more likely other vegetarians will be present at gatherings such as barbecues, and that vegetarian food will therefore be served. She is also concerned with the popular misuse of the word vegetarian.

"Although I don't see why meat-eaters need alternative terms to describe themselves, I'm more comfortable with people calling themselves flexitarians or meat-reducers than claiming to be vegetarians and ordering a prawn sandwich," she says. "This leads to misunderstanding and problems for vegetarians who care about boundaries – we always have to check whether the so-called vegetarian dish in a restaurant actually contains fish."

Julia Alderman warns, though, that an ill-conceived vegetarian diet can be just as unhealthy as a junk food-filled omnivorous diet. It's not just about swapping half of your dozen weekly hamburgers for veggie burgers instead, but a wider lifestyle change.

"A lot of people are moving towards this," she says, "but many are deterred by the lack of compromise strict vegetarianism involves. They want to eat a more vegetarian diet, but vegetarian books and restaurants don't acknowledge the existence of meat. Flexitarianism appeals to many as a more moderate approach, which moves towards a healthier diet – and that's got to be a good thing."

To find out more about flexitarianism, read *The Flexitarian Diet* by Dawn Jackson Blatner (£13.99, McGraw-Hill) or visit [dawnjacksonblatner.com](http://dawnjacksonblatner.com)



## “I couldn't bear it any longer – my resistance gave in”



Catherine Moore, 37, from west London, is a deputy director at Youth Dance England. A vegetarian since 21, she became flexitarian last year at 36.

"I grew up next to a farm and loved the piglets as a child. I also lived near an abattoir and would hear the pigs' desperate squealing as they were taken to slaughter – and that has always stayed with me. But as much as I loved animals, because I loved the taste of meat so much I could never commit to giving it up until I left university at 21, by which time I felt more grown up, and was more conscious of morals and ethics.

I was a bit of a strained veggie – I lapsed and ate fish on a trip to Singapore, and passing burger vans would always make my mouth water – but I didn't eat meat for 15 years. Nutritionally, I managed by myself. I had to think about what I was eating – beans, pulses and soya mince – and be more aware of issues such as iron intake. I put on weight as I ate a lot of cheese, which many veggies are guilty of.

I didn't plan to eat meat again, but at a restaurant in Tuscany on holiday last year with my boyfriend, he ordered wild boar and polenta, and I practically salivated onto his plate when it arrived. The aroma, the appearance – I couldn't bear it any longer. My resistance gave in and I had a mouthful. I was in raptures – a taste explosion. I spent the next day looking for a restaurant serving wild boar...

And that was it. What I decided then, due to sentimentality and ethical issues, was that I would eat only free-range meat. This means I can't often eat meat in restaurants, which is fine, because I still love veggie dishes – but when I cook meat at home, say twice a week, I can experiment with all kinds, like pigeon. I'm looking forward to trying rabbit and quail too.

My physical health is as good as ever. But emotionally I'm taking more delight in my food, without that denial which was always there before."