

The Washington Post

An Appetizing Reason to Take a Flexible Stance on Vegetarianism

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By Jennifer LaRue Huget
Tuesday, July 14, 2009

A Five Guys cheeseburger. That's about all that stands between me and a vegetarian diet.

I could easily forgo meat -- most of the time. I rarely eat any during the day and have only small portions with dinner. I prefer vegetable-topped pizzas to meat-laden pies and have largely lost my taste for steak. Except for salmon and tuna, I could even live without fish. But the thought of never eating another perfect cheeseburger does me in every time.

My interest in vegetarianism is piqued anew, though, by the American Dietetic Association's publication this month of an updated policy statement. The ADA, whose earlier position statements had supported vegetarian diets as healthful but relegated information about some of the age groups for which they're appropriate to the fine print, now states front and center that a properly planned and balanced diet can be healthful not only for adults but also for all children, from infants to teens. So can a vegan diet, with no animal products whatsoever (including eggs, cheese and yogurt, for example).

"This statement gets rid of the idea that grown-ups can be vegetarians, but maybe not kids," Ann Reed Mangel, co-author of the statement and accompanying paper, told me in an interview.

The ADA even gives the vegetarian green light to pregnant and lactating women. (You can read a summary at <http://www.adajournal.org/current> -- look under the heading "From the Association.")

The research paper accompanying the ADA's statement, written mostly for dietitians and health professionals, makes a good case for moving to such plant-based diets as the ovo-lacto vegetarian, incorporating eggs and dairy foods, and the pesco-vegetarian plan, which includes fish. The paper cites scientific evidence that these diets can help fight major diseases, such as Type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease and several kinds of cancer. It also provides guidance on how to orchestrate a healthful diet, focusing on key nutrients that can be hard for vegetarians to work into their meals.

Chief among those is Vitamin B12, principally found in animal proteins. Susan Levin, a registered dietitian affiliated with the pro-vegetarian Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine, explains that, gross as it sounds, vegetarians used to ingest more B12 when food wasn't as well washed as it is