

HEALTH

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 28, 2006

LEAN PLATE CLUB

Sally Squires

The Joy
Of Flex

Flexitarian.

That's the word Northwestern University registered dietitian Dawn Jackson Blatner coined to help people eat a more plant-based diet without becoming full-fledged vegetarians.

Being a flexitarian means eating 80 percent of your daily calories from fruit, vegetables, whole grains and beans and 20 percent from lean meat, fish and poultry.

"People want the health benefits of eating vegetarian," notes Blatner, a spokesperson for the American Dietetic Association. "But they don't necessarily want to give up their favorite foods."

And a new review of the health effects of vegetarian and vegan diets by Oxford University researchers suggests that flexitarians could be as healthy as vegetarians. While vegetarians and vegans — those who eat no animal products — have a slight edge in lower body weight and heart disease risk, the researchers found little difference in other major causes of death between health-conscious non-vegetarians and their vegetarian counterparts.

Nor have studies "shown clear differences in cancer rates between vegetarians and non-vegetarians," concludes Timothy J. Key, lead author of the study, which appears in this month's Proceedings of the Nutrition Society. Overall, the team concludes, the health of

See FLEXITARIAN, Page F6

LEAN PLATE CLUB

Vegetarian or Not, You Can Hit a Bull's-Eye

FLEXITARIAN, From F1

Western vegetarians and health-conscious non-vegetarians "is good and similar."

But that doesn't mean there's not room for improvement in both styles of eating. Here are some ways to tweak your diet:

Easy on the processed meat. That's one type of food that has consistently been linked to an increased risk of colon cancer. "It doesn't mean that you necessarily have to be a vegetarian, but the less [cold cuts and processed meats], the better," says Lawrence H. Kushi, associate director of epidemiology in the division of research at Kaiser Permanente in Oakland, Calif. So instead of pepperoni, sausage and hot dogs, consider the leanest cuts of meat, such as roast beef. Other options: fish, poultry without the skin and the lean cuts of lamb and pork, including tenderloin and chops.

Vegetarian doesn't always mean low-fat. French fries and soda are vegetarian, but they don't provide the essential nutrients recommended daily. The fries could also deliver a hefty portion of unhealthy trans fat — partially hydrogenated vegetable oil that is linked to heart disease. Diets that include a lot of cheese, whole milk, cream and butter are high in unhealthy saturated fat, whether they include meat or not.

Also, recent studies have found increased blood levels of homocysteine in vegetarians, possibly because they don't get enough B vitamins. Homocysteine is an emerging risk factor for heart disease, making it important for vegetarians not to eat a diet rich in saturated fat or trans fats.

Go varied. Here's where the vegetarians often shine. Their intake can be rich in a wide variety of fruit and vegetables, beans and whole grains. This provides plenty of complex carbohydrates, which are less likely to send blood sugar levels soaring than more highly processed white-flour

products. Other benefits: fiber, vitamin C and E, and beta carotene, which is converted in the body to vitamin A and is good for vision and immunity, among other things.

Boost B₁₂. Since animal products are the source of this key vitamin, low intake can be an issue for both vegetarians and vegans, according to the Oxford University review. Many breakfast cereals and soy milk are fortified with B₁₂, offering "ways to get it into your diet without necessarily popping a pill," Kushi says. Just choose skim or low-fat soy milk, since regular varieties can be high in fat.

Be sure to get enough omega-3s. These are the healthy fats found in seafood and fish that reduce the risk of heart disease. There's emerging evidence that they're also good for the brain, may help prevent some types of arthritis and could help boost mood. Meat eaters who don't eat fish twice a week as well as vegetarians and vegans can fall short on these healthy fats. One option: "Eat eggs fortified with omega-3 fatty acids" — that is, eggs from chickens fed fish meal — suggests registered dietitian Lisa

Dorfman, author of the "Vegetarian Sports Nutrition Guide" (Wiley; 2000).

Check calcium. Many Americans don't meet the recommended daily intake — about the equivalent of drinking three glasses of skim milk — of this bone-preserving mineral, which is also key for vital organs including the heart. Vegans are especially vulnerable to low calcium intake, the Oxford University review found. Tofu made with calcium carbonate and calcium-fortified foods, including ready-to-eat cereal, juice, soy or rice milk are options in addition to calcium supplements. ■

Join Sally Squires online from 1 p.m. to 2 p.m. today at www.washingtonpost.com. Subscribe to the free Lean Plate Club e-mail newsletter at www.leanplateclub.com.

French fries and soda are vegetarian, but they don't provide the essential nutrients recommended daily. The fries could also deliver a hefty portion of unhealthy trans fat — partially hydrogenated vegetable oil that is linked to heart disease.