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 [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.

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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.

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