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Aging Well

How to eat meat and still feel as healthy as a vegetarian

—BY KELLY GREENE



YOU'RE SORT OF A VEGETARIAN, but not quite. So what does that make you?

A flexitarian.

Although it's tough to pin down nutrition and culinary experts on a precise definition, they agree that the new term—catchier than such labels as part-time or semi-vegetarian, or health-conscious non-vegetarian—means you get the bulk of your calories from vegetables, fruits, whole grains, soy, beans and nuts. Yet flexitarians, unlike full-time vegetarians, also consume some fish, fowl and meat.

And some studies show that people who follow a flexitarian diet also reap most of the same health benefits as those who abstain from animal products altogether—and are healthier, thinner and may even live longer than people who have a meat-heavy diet.

"It's pretty exciting. A couple extra black beans here and there, and I'll live longer and be thinner," says Dawn Jackson Blatner, a registered dietitian at Northwestern Memorial Hospital Wellness Institute in Chicago and a spokeswoman for the American Dietetic Association, a group of nearly 65,000 food and nutrition professionals based in Chicago.

No 'Massive Effect'

In an article published earlier this year, scientists at Oxford University in England looked at reams of data comparing the health of vegetarians with "health-conscious non-vegetarians," meaning flexitarians, in affluent, Western countries. Health-conscious non-vegetarians are defined as regularly or occasionally eating meat or fish.

"The data we have show no clear differences" between the two in total mortality, blood pressure, incidences of stroke, or rates of colorectal, breast and prostate cancers, says Timothy Key, the lead author of the article and principal investigator at Oxford for the European Prospective Investigation of Cancer and Nutrition, which is studying links between diet, cancer and other chronic diseases by following 520,000 people in 10 European countries.

Vegetarians—particularly vegans—still have a slight edge when it comes to body-mass index and heart disease, says Mr. Key. But overall, eating meat occasionally "is not having a massive effect" on people who try to eat healthfully.

Other research shows flexitarianism's effect on body weight. In a 2003 study, researchers in Stockholm, Sweden, and at the U.S. Department of Agriculture Human Nutrition Research Center on Aging at Tufts University in Boston looked at 55,000 Swedish women and found that even "semi-vegetarians," who consume some meat, have a lower risk of being overweight or obese than their omnivorous counterparts.

The full-fledged meat eaters were "significantly heavier" than any of three vegetarian groups in the study. (In addition to semi-vegetarians, the researchers analyzed the diets of lacto-vegetarians, who eat no meat or eggs, and vegans, who eat no meat, eggs or dairy products.)

The semi-vegetarians in the study ate 0.1 serving of red meat a day, 0.02 serving of poultry and 0.34 serving of fish. In contrast, the omnivores had 1.1 servings of meat, 0.06 serving of poultry and 0.28 serving of fish.

Living Longer

Also in 2003, researchers at Loma Linda University in Loma Linda, Calif., analyzed six previous studies, along with new research, to pinpoint the relationship between very low meat intake and mortality. The studies included flexitarians, though they weren't identified by that term.

The researchers concluded that very low meat intake increased life expectancy by as much as 3.6 years for longtime practitioners of a diet that's very low in meat.

Among the studies analyzed:

■ An Oxford University study that looked at 6,000 vegetarians who never ate meat or fish and 5,000 non-vegetarians identified by the vegetarians as friends and relatives who were "of similar lifestyle and social class but who ate meat."

■ A health-food shoppers study, also conducted in the U.K., which culled 10,771 health-food store customers, health-food magazine readers, subscribers to Seventh-day Adventist Church publications, and members of vegetarian societies. Two-thirds of the study participants said they consumed meat or fish less than once a week.

■ A study of 1,904 German vegetarians that included "moderate" vegetarians with "low intake" of meat or fish.

■ Two studies that looked at more than 60,000 members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in California who were either classified as eating meat less than once a week or once or more a week.

Parceling Out the Protein

The goal of a flexitarian is to make at least 80% of meals vegetarian, says Ms. Blatner of the American Dietetic Association. The Institute of Medicine, meanwhile, says 10% to 35% of your calories should come from protein. (The institute, based in Washington, is part of the National Academies, an independent research organization that advises the federal government.)

So, Ms. Blatner says, "even the guidelines are flexible. People who know they feel better when they eat more protein can try more plant-based protein, and more leafy vegetables."

For those who are used to eating meat in just about all of their 21 meals a week, the initial target is, simply put, to scale it back, she adds. Perhaps it's eliminating the sausage or bacon at breakfast, or substituting a veggie burger for ground beef.

"It's this constant kind of evaluation and improvement," Ms. Blatner says. "Every day, every year, you take a step back and ask, 'Am I eating more plant food than animal food?' People want the health benefits, but they don't really get into the whole kind of vegetarian lifestyle."

Making the Switch

So how many people are eating this way so far?

There's no firm head count. Vegetarian Resource Group, a Baltimore nonprofit that researches vegetarianism, finds consistently that about 7% of the population eats no meat. The group also points to a 2005 survey by Aramark Corp., a large food-service provider based in Philadelphia, which found that 24% of 100,000 college students considered it important to find vegan meals on campus. "Those kids aren't vegetarians, but they like those items because they're healthier," says Charles Stahler, the nonprofit's co-director.

Flexitarianism also appears to be attracting eaters on the other end of the spectrum: people who embraced vegetarianism in their youth.

Mollie Katzen, author of the best-selling "Moosewood Cookbook," which features vegetarian recipes, now eats meat regularly. Her latest title, "Eat, Drink & Weigh Less," co-written with Harvard University nutritionist Walter Willett, includes protein options ranging from beef to buckwheat noodles with cashews.

"I have salmon probably twice a week," she says. "I love it." ■