

Vegan Diet - A Fad or an Effective Tool?

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Introduction

In recent times many diets came to limelight. "Vegan Diets" have gained so much popularity. Many celebrities and sports person follow the vegan diet due to environmental or health reasons. In countries like India, which is one of the largest vegetarian community (35.71%) and most of which follow the vegetarian diet due to their religious belief. The strict pattern of veganism involves complete abandonment of animal food including milk and dairy products.

This article will provide you with the insight on everything you would like to know before starting the vegan diet and thus can follow it the right way.

Health effect of a vegan diet

Being veganism has its own health benefits. Vegan diets are high in fibre, magnesium, folic acid, vitamins C and E, iron, and phytochemicals, and provide fewer calories, saturated fat and cholesterol, omega-3 fatty acids, vitamin D, calcium, zinc, and vitamin B-12.

Let's discuss some of the health benefits of a vegan diet:

- **Vegan Diet and weight loss:** Vegans tend to have a thinner waist and have lower BMI. That is the reason why a large number of people especially teenagers turn to vegan diets as a way to lose excess weight. People who stick to vegan diet not only change their diet but also the way of life which means they are more active, do not smoke or get into alcohol abuse. Studies have shown that people following a vegan diet tend to lose more weight than those following a low calorie - restricted diet. As this is a plant source diet, which is high in fibre and phytonutrients which makes the person full in spite of eating fewer calories, help to lose weight.
- **Vegan diet and type 2 diabetes:** Shifting to a vegan diet may help to lower blood sugar levels and helps to keep type 2 diabetes in check. Several studies show that vegans have lower blood sugar levels and have higher insulin sensitivity. The study indicates that 78% of vegans have a lower risk of developing type 2 diabetes than non-vegans. The effect can

be explained as the vegan diet is high in fibre and to be lower in calories, vitamin C and phytonutrients that dulls the blood sugar response.

- **Vegan diet and Cardiovascular health:** In a recent study conducted by Lee and Park, vegans have low BMI, have lower plasma lipids, and have lower blood pressure as compared to other vegetarians. Obesity is a significant risk factor for Cardiovascular Diseases, and the lower BMI in vegans is a protective factor for reducing the risk of heart health. With the higher consumption of fruit and vegetables, is associated with lower blood cholesterol levels, a lower incidence of stroke, and has a lower risk of mortality from ischemic heart disease.
- **Vegan diet and Cancer:** Vegans consume more legumes, soy, nuts, fruit and vegetables, tomatoes than other vegetarians and nonvegetarians. Fruits and vegetables are a potent source of antioxidants which protect against cancer of the lung, mouth, oesophagus, and stomach. On the other hand, regular use of legumes provides a measure of protection against stomach and prostate cancer. Tomatoes are a good source of Lycopene which is known to protect against prostate cancer.

Foods to Eat

A vegan diet is totally plant-based and they avoid consuming any animal product and byproducts. The food pyramid of vegans is discussed below:

1. Select whole grains, complex carbohydrates and avoid refined carbohydrates 6-11 servings stretched over the day.
2. Include at least 5 -6 portions of a variety of fruits and vegetables daily
3. Substitute dairy products with low fat, soy or almond milk and yoghurts without sugar.
4. Consume beans, pulses and other plant sourced proteins.
5. Choose MUFA rich oils, omega 3 foodstuffs like flaxseeds, walnuts, soy and olive oil
6. Drink adequate amount of fluids to maintain the hydration levels and to flush out the toxins - 2 ½ to 3 litres daily
7. Moderate exercise 5 times a week.

Figure 1

What to consume

If appropriate food choices are made, one can get all the nutrients to avoid any nutritional deficiencies. The plant-based foods that must be included are:

1. Tofu, tempeh and seitan as a protein-rich alternative to meat, fish, poultry and eggs.
2. **Legumes:** Beans, lentils and peas are the powerhouses of many nutrients. Sprouting and fermenting cooking method can increase nutrient absorption.
3. **Nuts and nut butter:** Nuts are good sources of iron, fibre, magnesium, zinc, selenium and vitamin E.
4. **Seeds:** Diet consist of hemp, chia and flax seeds, contains a good amount of protein and omega-3 fatty acids.
5. **Calcium-fortified plant milk and yoghurts:** These help them to achieve their recommended dietary calcium intakes.
6. **Spirulina and chlorella:** These algae provide complete protein.
7. **Nutritional yeast:** Great way to increase the protein quotient of the vegan dishes fortified with vitamin B12-fortified.
8. **Whole grains, cereals and pseudocereals:** It needs no introduction, that why these complex carbohydrates should be part of a vegan diet. These foods are a great source of complex carbs, fibre, iron, B-vitamins and several other minerals. Spelt, teff, amaranth and quinoa are some of the foods to indulge in.
9. **Sprouted and fermented foods:** Tempeh, miso, sauerkraut, pickles, kimchi and komboucha often are a good source of probiotics and vitamin K2.
10. **Fruits and vegetables:** Both are great foods to increase nutrient intake and a good source of antioxidants. Dark

Leafy vegetables such as bok choy, spinach, kale, watercress and mustard greens are particularly high in iron and calcium.

Foods to Avoid

Vegans do not eat any animal foods, as well as their products like dairy, eggs etc. These include:

1. Meat and poultry
2. Fish and seafood
3. Dairy: Milk, yoghurt, cheese, butter, cream, ice cream.
4. Eggs
5. Bee products: Honey, bee pollen, royal jelly, etc.
6. Animal-based protein supplements: Whey, casein, lactose, egg white albumen, gelatin, L-cysteine, animal-derived vitamin D3 and fish-derived omega-3 fatty acids.

How to Minimize the Risk of Potential Deficiencies

A well-planned diet that is nutrient rich and limits the use of processed foods, in fact, is important for everyone, not only vegans. On the other hand, which is self-planned or poorly planned that lacks nutrients are at risk of certain nutritional deficiencies.

Studies show that vegans are at a higher risk of vitamin B12, vitamin D, omega 3 fatty acids, iodine, iron, calcium and zinc deficiencies which make vegans more prone to the risk of bone fractures. Pregnant and breastfeeding women along with children particularly are at a higher risk. In order to minimize the likelihood of deficiencies, one must consume nutrient-rich plant foods. Some of these measures could be:

- Consuming Fortified Foods, especially with calcium, vitamin D and vitamin B12, to reduce the risk of certain nutritional deficiencies and to meet the daily requirement.
- Fermenting, sprouting methods can increase the absorption of iron and zinc and be practiced more frequently.
- Cooking in iron cast pots and pans
- Avoid tea and coffee with meals and combining iron-rich foods with a source of vitamin C to further boost iron absorption.
- Lastly, including omega-3 containing foods, especially those high in alpha-linolenic acid (ALA) like chia, hemp, flaxseeds, walnuts and soybeans, Recommended daily intake of 200–300 mg of EPA and DHA from an algae oil supplement may be a safer way to prevent low levels.

Conclusion

A vegan diet can be a boon, when done right. It may provide various health benefits, such as lowering blood cholesterol, lowering blood pressure, and lowering weight. It also helps to prevent certain chronic diseases like Diabetes and cancer. However, if the diet is not planned properly, it can lead to certain nutritional deficiencies and can prove to be a bane.

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