

Going meat-free?

Being vegetarian can peacefully coexist with having diabetes. Experts discuss the options, whether you go whole hog and avoid all animal products or simply try a meatless meal now and again.

BY Hope S. Warshaw, R.D., CDE ILLUSTRATIONS BY Tracy Walker

Q: When a person says “I’m a vegetarian” or “I’m a vegan,” are these one and the same?

A: No. In fact, there’s a broad range of vegetarian eating styles. Leah Hadad, 48 and PWD type 1, of Washington, D.C., is on one side of the spectrum: “I call myself a semi-vegetarian and base my diet on whole grains, vegetables, and fruit,” she says. “I eat fish once or twice a week and poultry rarely, like on Thanksgiving.” She started exploring vegetarianism when she was diagnosed with diabetes. “I wanted to stave off complications, and one weapon was less animal protein,” she says. “But it was the diagnosis of breast cancer five years ago that pushed me to ax red meat.” Vegans eat no animal products, including meat, fish, eggs, milk, and honey.

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Eating vegan? You may need supplements or fortified foods for calcium, potassium, vitamin D, and vitamin E.

Q: Is a vegetarian eating plan more healthful?

A: “Research shows that vegetarians tend to have a lower incidence of obesity, heart disease, type 2 diabetes, and some cancers,” says Brie Turner-McGrievy, R.D., a researcher at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

She cites her research comparing the dietary quality of a vegan diet with an eating plan that meets guidelines from the American Diabetes Association. “People on the vegan diet had higher diet quality with increased intakes of carbohydrate, fiber, vitamins C and A, magnesium, and potassium,” she says. “However, neither group (like many Americans) met the recommended intakes for vitamins D and E and the minerals calcium and potassium.”

But being vegetarian doesn't guarantee healthful eating habits, as Leah discovered thumbing through her first vegetarian cookbook, which relied heavily on saturated fat and cholesterol-dense cheese and eggs to substitute for meat, she says.

The American Dietetic Association's recently revised

position paper on vegetarian diets gives a thumbs-up to vegetarianism. The paper says well-planned vegetarian diets, including total vegetarian or vegan eating practices, are healthful, nutritionally adequate, and may help prevent and treat certain diseases. Vegetarianism is appropriate for people of all ages and at all stages of life.

Q: Can I follow a diabetes eating plan and be a vegetarian?

A: “Yes, vegetarian and diabetes eating plans go together naturally. The fiber boost can help with blood glucose, blood lipid, and weight control,” says Jennifer Stack, R.D., CDE, chef and dietitian at the Culinary Institute of America. Because you'll likely eat more of your calories as carbohydrate, you may need to take more blood glucose-lowering medication to

cover your blood glucose levels. This isn't a bad thing. What's most important is controlling blood glucose levels over time.

Don't sweat eating enough protein. If you are like most Americans, you get more than you need—about 15–20 percent of your daily calories. The recommended amount is slightly less than half a gram per pound of body weight. Do eat an

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Semivegetarian approaches

- ◆ **Eat less meat.** If you're a fan of high-fat animal foods, simply eat less of them less often. This can help you eat less saturated fat, right-size your portions, and green-size your carbon footprint.
- ◆ **Plan a few meatless meals.** Go meatless a few meals each week. Use beans, tofu, and grains such as quinoa, barley, and millet (which contain protein). Extend your starches by sautéing and mixing in nonstarchy veggies such as celery, onions, cabbage, peppers, and parsnips.
- ◆ **Dine on the Mediterranean.** Make your meals emphasize fruits, vegetables, and whole grains. Use less red meat by substituting nuts, fish, and beans. Use chopped toasted nuts on salads, swap a fish fillet for meat in a favorite recipe, and use a bean spread, such as hummus, on whole grain bread.



assortment of good-quality lean protein including eggs, low-fat dairy foods, reduced-fat cheese, and soy products.

In addition, you need not bother making sure that each meal contains a protein source (although protein can help you feel full longer). Also, there's no need to treat low blood glucose (hypoglycemia) with a food containing protein. These bits of dated advice don't stand up to current science.

Q: If I choose a vegetarian eating plan, what nutritional concerns should I have?

A: The more food groups you include in your eating plan, the easier time you'll have meeting your nutrient needs. "Plan meals with a wide variety of foods and pay extra attention to foods that provide good-quality protein, vitamin B12, calcium, and iron," says Jackie Newgent, R.D., culinary nutritionist and author of *The All-Natural Diabetes Cookbook* (American Diabetes Association, 2007). Turner-McGrievy's study assessing dietary quality showed vegan men and those following American Diabetes Association guidelines were deficient in magnesium. Male and female vegans fell short on their zinc quotas. She advises a B12 supplement or fortified cereal or soymilk for vegans.

Q: Does being vegetarian help prevent or delay type 1 diabetes or type 2 diabetes and related diseases, such as obesity and heart disease?

A: "While no research conclusively links vegetarianism with either type of diabetes, numerous research studies over time have made the link," Turner-McGrievy says. Several studies relate early consumption of dairy foods and red meat to an increased incidence of type



Good-quality protein sources include eggs, low-fat dairy products, and soy.

1 diabetes. The causes of type 1, however, continue to be the focus of worldwide research efforts.

When it comes to type 2 diabetes, a disease continuum with insulin resistance and chronic inflammation at the core, Turner-McGrievy cites many studies showing that a vegetarian lifestyle is associated with improving blood glucose and lipid management. Vegetarianism can help people control their weight, improve insulin sensitivity (decrease insulin resistance), lower blood pressure, and improve cardiovascular health.

Even going semivegetarian is beneficial. A study in newly diagnosed PWDs type 2 showed that those on a Mediterranean eating plan high in fish, olive oil, and nuts needed to start blood glucose-lowering medications less often, lost more weight, and had greater A1C improvement than those following a lower-fat eating plan.

Such positive results with vegetarian and Mediterranean eating plans are not surprising, says Adriene Worthington, R.D., program dietitian for Oldways and the Mediterranean Foods Alliance in Boston. "Extensive

research shows that an eating pattern rich in fruit, vegetables, grains, fish, and beans, and allowing for meat very sparingly—such as the Mediterranean diet pattern—can help achieve similar results."

Q: Why don't more people follow a vegetarian eating plan?

A: "We are meatcentric in this country," Worthington says. "Being vegetarian is not something most of us learn at a young age, so it's not the norm."

Consuming less meat takes more effort. Leah Hadad cooks most of the foods for her family of five rather than depending on packaged products.

"If you are motivated to move to vegetarianism, go for it," Newgent says. "But what's ideal is to find a healthy eating plan you can stick with long-term." 🍌

Hope Warshaw coauthored Real-Life Guide to Diabetes (American Diabetes Association, 2009).