

Real Common Sense

June 2022

Why Vegan?

Hello, this is Dr. Ellen. In this month's '*Real Common Sense*' newsletter, I want to write about veganism, and specifically 'whole food veganism'. My intention is to describe this healthiest of dietary patterns, and touch on the benefits of whole food, plant-based eating. The advantages of being a vegan are supported by decades of scientific studies. I have personally found being a whole food vegan to be health-promoting and energizing. Using the Ellen Cutler Method (ECM), I have also found that the overwhelming majority of those I have treated throughout my years of practice do best on this dietary approach. For some, simply switching to this dietary lifestyle alone has resulted in definite improvements in their health and wellness.

By the way, if you didn't get a chance to see my previous newsletters, you can find them on my brand new website, www.drellencutler.com.

What is Whole Food Veganism?

First, let's identify some terms defining different patterns of eating. The standard American diet (aka 'SAD') is generally considered to be an omnivorous diet. The omnivore consumes all types of foods. A vegetarian does not eat meats of any kind, including fish. If they eat other animal-derived foods, namely dairy and eggs, they are lacto-ovo-vegetarian. There are those who also add fish to this, making them pescatarians. Lacto-vegetarians add dairy products as their only animal-derived food, and ovo-vegetarians add only eggs. Vegans are those who do not add any animal-derived foods whatsoever.

Another major consideration is food processing and preparation. The SAD features an abundance of highly processed foods. An extreme example of this is 'food' that contains "empty calories". Such 'foods' and 'drinks' are created to contain no significant micronutrients but are high in calories, having a high sugar, fat, or alcohol content.^[1] However, the less processing of a food, the generally healthier that food is. One might begin by looking at the way your food was grown or raised. The greater the micronutrient value and less the amount of potentially toxic chemicals, the healthier. So, for example, organically or biodynamically grown vegetables are more health-promoting than 'conventionally grown'. Processing food can diminish its nutritional value. For example, turning whole grains into flour greatly increases their glycemic index, thus allowing the negative effect of much more rapid absorption from the gut. Another example would be cooking. Heating foods can adversely affect their nutrient content and inactivate otherwise functional enzymes.

I have eaten a whole food plant-based diet for many years, organic whenever possible. Another very important decision I made long ago was to be a raw vegan. My whole food vegan diet contains little to no processed foods, which maximizes the nutrients available to me. It is one of the major healthful lifestyle choices that have helped me remain fit and resilient, both physically and mentally.

What are the Benefits of being a Vegan?

There has been an incredibly large amount of research throughout the world studying the health effects of different foods and diets. The bulk of the scientific evidence demonstrates that a diet of minimally processed foods direct from nature, predominantly plants, is the optimal choice for health promotion and disease prevention.^[2] This is not so surprising when we see the compelling evidence that the body is generally designed to eat a predominantly whole food, plant-based diet. The structures of the digestive tract, including the teeth, as well as the positive effects of such a diet on the gut microbiome support such a claim.^[3,4]

A strikingly large number of studies have confirmed the benefits of many of the biologically active compounds naturally occurring in plant foods. These include bioactive proteins, polyphenols, phytosterols, and carotenoids. These can help regulate, prevent, or even diminish several chronic disorders, including diabetes, cardiovascular diseases, blood pressure, and oxidative stress, as well as brain health, gut health, and lipid profile. This area of research is gaining increasing acceptance and importance with the ongoing discoveries of naturally occurring molecules involved in a growing diversity of disease processes.^[5]

There are many studies addressing the overall health benefits of a vegan diet. Such studies look at the overall dietary patterns, rather than the effects of specific micronutrients. Metabolic syndrome is a cluster of conditions that include increased blood pressure, high blood sugar, excess body fat around the waist, and abnormal cholesterol or triglyceride levels. These in turn significantly increase your risk of heart disease and type 2 diabetes.^[6] A vegan diet has been found to protect against metabolic and cardiac diseases. Vegans generally have lower fasting blood sugars, a lower body mass index (BMI) with generally lower amounts of both subcutaneous and visceral fat, and better blood lipid profiles. These positive changes are due at least in part to the increased dietary fiber intake of vegans.^[7]

Vegan diets can lower systemic inflammation. Several studies have shown that a vegan diet is associated with a lower level of C-reactive protein (CRP) compared to omnivores. CRP is a protein made by your liver that is released into your bloodstream in response to inflammation. This difference is less pronounced in 'vegetarians' when compared to omnivores.^[8] Inflammatory disease processes can be diminished by a vegan diet, such as autoimmune diseases. For example, rheumatoid arthritis is exacerbated by excess body weight and consumption of animal products (which are pro-inflammatory), whereas a vegan diet can help reduce pain and inflammation. Also, studies have shown that dietary fiber found in a vegan diet

can improve the gut bacteria composition and increase bacterial diversity, further reducing inflammation and joint pain.^[9]

Scientific studies have also shown that the many health benefits derived from a vegan diet are compatible with and supportive of successful sports performance. A well-planned and properly supplemented vegan diet can promote increased muscle mass and strength and an excellent state of health for athletes. Vegan diets are compatible with high performance and competitive sports.^[10] Vegan diets are also helpful in maximizing endurance, recovery, and resistance to illness. And supplemental protein is optional for most athletes who carefully construct their diet with higher-protein plant foods.^[11] Supplementation with B12 and vitamin D is usually warranted in vegans, and zinc, DHA/EPA (omega 3 fatty acids), and possibly taurine may be as well.^[11,12]

There is evidence that a whole food plant-based diet has anti-aging benefits. For example, telomeres are the protective DNA at the ends of each chromosome that keep the chromosomes intact and therefore functional. One study found that lifestyle interventions, featuring a whole food plant-based diet, were associated with increased telomere length after 5 years of follow-up compared to controls.^[13] Another anti-aging benefit is seen in advanced glycation end products (AGEs), which are known to cause increased oxidative stress and inflammation. Dry heat promotes AGE formation by 10- to 100-fold above the raw state in most foods. Animal-derived foods that are high in fat and protein are generally AGE-rich and prone to new AGE formation during cooking. This contrasts with vegetables, fruits, and whole grains, which contain relatively few AGEs, even after cooking.^[14]

The skin in particular benefits from a whole food plant-based diet. One study showed that increased dietary green and yellow vegetables decreased facial wrinkling.^[15] In another study, high intake of vegetables, legumes, and especially prunes, apples and tea appeared to be protective against solar skin damage, whereas a high intake of meat, dairy, and butter appeared to have adverse effects.^[16] Antioxidants in the skin, such as the carotenoids (including beta-carotene and lycopene), protect against harmful external factors, which include irradiation and environmental toxins. Dietary carotenoids, found in large amounts in many fruits and vegetables, increase the carotenoid levels in the skin, while stressors such as fatigue, illness, smoking, and alcohol consumption decrease carotenoid levels.^[17]

The many benefits of a whole food vegan diet described above help explain some of the many wonderful improvements I have seen in my years of clinical practice... and in my own personal experience, as a raw vegan. The use of ECM has allowed me to verify the potential benefits of a whole food vegan diet for each individual, as well as the foods especially important for them. ECM also determines the foods to which they are sensitive and helps clear the sensitivities, thus leading to a more healthful, robust, and resilient life.^[18]

Be well, be healthy, and remember...

"Some people think that the plant-based whole foods diet is extreme. Half a million a year will have their chests opened up, a vein taken from their leg and sewn onto their coronary artery. Some people would call that extreme."

– Dr. Caldwell Esselstyn, 'Forks Over Knives.'

Dr. Ellen

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18. Learn about ECM at www.drellencutler.com
19. Watch about Veganism at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2tT50k-DEIU>