

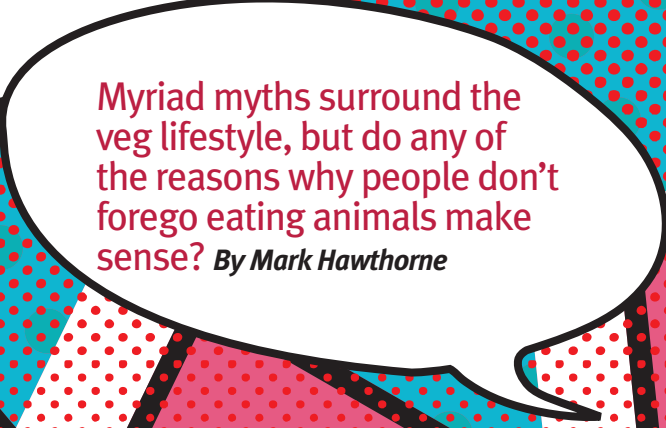




I Can't Be  
**Veg** Because...  
(insert  

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excuse here)!



Myriad myths surround the veg lifestyle, but do any of the reasons why people don't forego eating animals make sense? *By Mark Hawthorne*

MATT CONSTANTINE IS REALLY TRYING TO go vegan. Honest. There's just one problem: he's allergic to fruits, vegetables, and many legumes. And while that might seem like nature's way of saying, "Belly up to the spare-ribs bar, pardner," Constantine won't use it as an excuse to eat meat. "I think it's *because* of my allergies, not despite them, that I'm interested in going vegan," he says.

Not everyone is as determined as Constantine, though, and the variety of rationales people use—real or imagined—for not adhering to a plant-based diet range from the predictable to the preposterous. Some people express concern that they won't get enough protein unless they eat meat, while others may shrug and say the animals will be slaughtered anyway. Whatever defense an omnivore may offer, a little dose of truth can help get them back on track.

### Myth #1: It's Not Healthy

Of all the myths surrounding a plant-based diet, the claim that "vegan" equals "unhealthy" is perhaps the most persistent—and the easiest to debunk. We're saturated with messages claiming that meat, eggs, and dairy are good for our bodies, so it's not terribly surprising to hear someone declare they simply cannot be vegan. Many people believe they *must* eat animals to get protein and calcium, which join vitamin B-12 to form the most misunderstood trio of nutrients. But what do experts say?

"With a good, quality, whole-foods diet—one with lots of color—there are no nutrients in animal-based foods that are not better obtained from plant-based foods," says T. Colin Campbell, PhD, professor of nutritional biochemistry at Cornell University and author of *The China Study*. "This especially goes

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“I wanted desperately to share with my friends the wonders of a vegetarian diet and how great it is for the animals. Even my closest friends at the time didn't want to know. Finding that balance, where I could be true to my ethics and still remain a good friend, took time.”

—Marji Beach, vegan since 1994

for protein, because the level of protein in a plant-based diet, about eight to 12 percent of calories, is all that we need.”

John McDougall, MD, one of the first traditional physicians to assert that a vegetarian diet can reverse such medical conditions as heart disease and diabetes, agrees. “Plants are, by nature, rich sources of protein,” he says. “Plants are so rich that they can meet the protein needs of the earth's largest animals, including elephants, giraffes, and cows. So, clearly, the protein needs of relatively small humans are easily met by plants.” If anything, McDougall says, we're likely to get *too much* protein. “Unlike fat, protein cannot be stored, so when it is consumed in excess of our needs, it can accumulate in the liver and kidneys as toxic protein byproducts.” Moreover, getting protein from meat, eggs, and dairy is actually detrimental to our bodies: the amino acids in animal products are high in sulfur, which must be neutralized by buffers in human bones. “The bones dissolve to release the buffering materials, eventually resulting in osteoporosis,” says McDougall.

In addition to protein, some diet defectors

fret over B-12, a vitamin that helps our bodies ward off strokes and heart disease. “There is more than one way to meet your nutrient needs, and you don't need any animal products for B-12,” says Dina Aronson, a registered dietitian. “B-12 is actually manufactured by bacteria and is contained in many plants, which is how animals, and those who eat them, get the vitamin. Since we live in such a sanitized culture and wash our produce so well, we cannot depend on plants for B-12.” Aronson advises all vegans to take a B-12 supplement and/or consume foods fortified with B-12, such as non-dairy milk, breakfast cereals, or nutritional yeast. “If you are truly committed to achieving optimal health and minimizing the suffering of all creatures, then B-12 is a moot point. Pop a pill or eat fortified foods. B-12 supplements are easy, cheap, and reliable.”

And lest you believe you must get calcium from milk and cheese, James Burke, RD, puts that tired myth to rest. “There are many fantastic sources of calcium that one can select both in and out of the dairy section while still choosing to avoid animal products,” he says. “In the dairy section you could make the choice of soy or rice milk, soy cheeses, and even soy yogurts. Separate from that section, though, vegans can get ample calcium from their choices of dark-green leafy vegetables, grains, nuts, and the many soy products that are on the market.”

Among the more unusual health claims that nutritionists and doctors refute is that blood type determines one's optimal diet. The so-called “blood-type diet” suggests that type-O people thrive on animal protein, type-A people will benefit from consuming mostly vegetables, type-B people are dairy-eating omnivores, and those with type-AB blood should combine the diets of types A and

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“Giving up familiar flavors and foods, especially cheese. I think we sometimes allow ourselves to carry some denial about the true price animals pay for the choices we make. Once I made it a practice to consciously acknowledge the realities of the dairy industry every time I contemplated eating cheese, I quickly lost my taste for it.”

—Jan Allegretti, vegan since 1997

B. Trouble is, blood type has little to do with body chemistry or digestion, and any science to back up the blood-type diet is lacking—a point Campbell emphasizes. “This diet has no convincing evidence,” he says. “I’m 75, type O, do not eat animal products, and I enjoy an active life.”

### Myth #2: The Animals Will Be Killed Anyway

While evidence *does* show that a plant-based diet will improve one’s physical well-being, going veg for ethical reasons is an equally powerful incentive—perhaps even more so. An ethical vegan acknowledges that every life has value, and he or she will not abide the exploitation of animals for food, clothing, or any other use by humans. It’s not just a matter of good health; it’s a matter of principle. “Ethics are the primary motivation for the majority of vegans in the US and Europe,” says Che Green, executive director of the Humane Research Council, which analyzes data and

“Even when our ethics oblige us to maintain a cruelty-free lifestyle, society doesn’t always make it easy. Humans are social beings, and few activities are as ingrained in us as sharing a meal together.”

trends affecting animals. Vegans also tend to have “a-ha moments,” according to Green, which inspire abrupt dietary change, rather than a slow tapering off of animal-product consumption.

But a world where animal exploitation is as rampant as cholesterol in a meat-eater’s arteries may leave some diners overwhelmed. One of the most commonly repeated pretexts for eating omni is that with billions of animals dying in slaughterhouses every year, one vegetarian will make little difference. Andrew Linzey, director of the Oxford Centre for Animal Ethics and author of *Creatures of the Same God: Explorations in Animal Theology*, has a different perspective. “I think the basic ethical arguments for vegetarianism are quite simple: respect for sentient life and avoidance of causing suffering,” he says. “We can live happy, healthy lives without meat products. Given that lack of necessity, vegetarianism becomes obligatory. Moreover, systems of animal farming invariably involve suffering to animals, not just at the point of slaughter, but through the various conditions of life that are

imposed upon them.” Since there’s no actual *need* to consume animals, and since animals raised for food suffer during their lives before slaughter, the only logical solution is a veg lifestyle.

Ethicist Peter Singer, author of *Animal Liberation*, agrees, arguing that the misery animals endure in factory farms is the best reason to go veg. “For me, the issue is not so much that the animals are killed, but the suffering they go through during their lives,” Singer says. “That is what we support by purchasing animal products. We provide the meat producers with an incentive to continue to do it.”

Though most of the commodification of animals takes place in factory farms, some erstwhile vegetarians have suggested that humanely raised and slaughtered free-range animals enables cruelty-free eating. But Mylan Engel, Jr., professor of philosophy at Northern Illinois University, says such “humane meat” is a myth. “For

one thing, the animals raised in ‘free-range’ and non-intensive farms are subjected to the same painful mutilations that factory farm-raised animals are forced to endure, including branding, dehorning, debeaking, ear clipping, toe clipping, and castration, all without painkillers,” he says. “Also, most people agree that, other things being equal, it is worse to kill a conscious, sentient creature than it is to kill a plant. But in the case of food, other things are *not* equal. Since a plant-based diet is more nutritious than a meat-based diet, consistency with our own beliefs commits us to the view that it is worse to kill conscious, sentient animals for food than it is to kill plants for food, even if those animals have been raised humanely.”

### Myth #3: It’s Socially Awkward

Even when our ethics oblige us to maintain a cruelty-free lifestyle, society doesn’t always make it easy. Humans are social beings, and few activities are as ingrained in us as sharing a meal together. It can be awfully tempting to say, “All my friends are eating meat; I just



## Parties 101

Jo Stepaniak, author of *The Vegan Sourcebook*, gives VegNews the lowdown on making social events less stressful for the veg-minded.

❖ If appropriate, ask your hosts if you can bring something to the gathering. Make something spectacular that you really like, and be sure there’s plenty of it. If there’s nothing else for you to eat, you’ll know you’ll be happy and satisfied.

❖ If the hosts don’t know you’re vegetarian, prepare in advance. Make sure you eat something light before you go to the event. If there is food for you to eat, you won’t be too stuffed to enjoy it, and if there isn’t, you’ll be sated enough until you get home.

❖ Don’t focus too much on the food. If there is something vegan for you to eat, enjoy it and talk it up. If not, steer your conversations away from food and anything controversial or confrontational.

❖ Get to know the other people at the gathering. Let them talk about themselves, ask questions, show sincere interest, and move the focus from yourself onto them.

❖ Bring a sparkling, upbeat attitude with you. Be cheerful. Smile! Nobody can say that vegetarians aren’t terrific people if you are fun to be around.

❖ If appropriate, bring along an advocate (such as your partner or a good friend) who will support you, lift your spirits, and keep you from grousing. Someone who has a positive disposition is the best choice. Even if the event is a miserable flop despite your best efforts, you can both have a few good laughs about it later.





**How am I going  
to tell Brad I  
like to eat  
vegetables?!**

want to fit in." Indeed, many vegetarians have learned that omnivores may actually feel threatened when faced with someone who chooses not to eat animals.

Valerie Mizuhara, a real estate agent, discovered this the hard way when she swore off animal-based foods, bypassing the vegetarian stage and embracing veganism with one fell swoop. She suddenly found she'd become something of a social outcast. "There were lots of personal attacks and jabs from family members because I didn't eat meat at holiday gatherings," she says. "My aunt would say, 'Vegetarians obviously have no taste buds!'" Though Mizuhara wasn't terribly surprised by her family's reaction, she was stunned by the response from co-workers. "The men harassed me on a daily basis," she says. "They even brought in a barbecue and were barbecuing meat at lunch to piss me off." So she challenged her antagonists to watch *Peaceable Kingdom*, the 2003 documentary about factory farming, and many of them did. "That shut them up," she says. "Those who watched it told me they were moved and had either cut back or cut out meat completely."

It's understandable that meat-eating peers would pressure vegetarians, says Carol J. Adams, author of *Living Among Meat Eaters*. "Until a vegan or vegetarian enters the room, people don't see themselves as meat-eaters. They are merely 'eaters,' and it is we vegans who have made them aware of what they are doing. Often this is discomfoting." Adams admits their questions can get tiresome. "When they ask, 'Where do you get your protein?,' I ask, 'Where do you get your fiber?'" She cites another comment she hears

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“Finding stylish non-leather shoes. Basically, whenever I saw a nice pair of nice non-leather shoes, which was not often, I'd buy them. Over time I started seeing more and more selection, so today it's no problem at all.” *Lisa Franzetta, vegan since 1990*

frequently: "Well, I think we have to take care of the homeless—or the hungry, or abused children, or victims of genocide—first." Adams calls this "retrograde humanism" and rejects the notion that we should have to accept a human-centered definition of what social justice looks like. "The *only* people who think you can't be vegan and help human beings

Whether we "like cheese too much," "have a blood type that requires meat," or "can't find any good recipes," the truth is, we can justify any behavior to suit our desires. Fortunately, keeping meat, eggs, and dairy products off our plates is less difficult, and more rewarding, than some might think. Take it from someone who won't allow rationalizations to get in the

“Until a vegan or vegetarian enters the room, people don't see themselves as meat-eaters. They are merely 'eaters,' and it is we vegans who have made them aware of what they are doing. Often this is discomfoting.”

are meat-eaters," she says. Adams adds that it's important we remember that adopting a plant-based diet creates a social dynamic. "Simply by being vegan, we are saying that you can change your life. You can learn about suffering, oppression, and environmental concerns, and you can do something about it, every day of your life."

way of a healthier diet.

"With my allergies, I have more than enough excuses not to try being vegan," says Matt Constantine, who was inspired by watching his wife, Natala, beat her diabetes with a plant-based diet. "The biggest surprise so far is that once I started considering what I *could* eat rather than what I *couldn't*, I saw a wealth of foods out there. For example, I've never been much for beans and I figured since I have a strong reaction to lentils that they were probably off my list. Not so. I've been enjoying beans in numerous meals lately. Also, I can't drink soymilk, so I assumed tofu was off limits, but I'm enjoying it every day. I've made it a life goal to go vegan."

Now that's a man who's not going to let a few myths get in his way. **VN**

**Mark Hawthorne** is very happy that veganism meets all his ethical and nutritional needs. He's still working on the social part.

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“The thinking at the time was you'd become anemic and sickly. I didn't care; I'd have rather died than eat animals. Instead, I dropped 40 pounds. The great irony was that at a high-school reunion, I found I had become the picture of health while my meat-eating peers ended up looking like Uncle Fester.”

*Dan Mathews, vegan since 1985*