

# Vegetarianism: a healthy eating habit or an eating disorder research paper

[Food & Diet](#)



Arguably, the food we eat in our entire life are imperative to long term stability, as well as health. The most important people who should give more focus nutrition and diet are children due to their continuous and active growth and development. In fact, losing weight and growing thinner is the global trend that media focuses on. This influence has tremendously been reflected on the eating habits of people. The argument in this case is that vegetarianism is a pathway of developing serious eating disorders, especially by focusing on vegetarians' psychological and physiological health, as well as the reasons behind the behavior adoption. Vegetarianism is one of the practices that encompass following plant-based diet such as vegetables and fruits, with or exclusive of egg or dairy products, as well as exclusion of meat. There are various reasons why individual choose to be vegetarians, it includes religion, ethics, and health. Research clearly supports the benefits of following plant-based diet. Most widespread vegetarian practices include vegans, lactovegetarian, Lacto-ovo-vegetarians, pesco-vegetarians, as well as partial-vegetarians.

Undeniably, the world today is changing so fast, thanks to the media influence. Facts and theories show that losing twenty or thirty pounds can be a perfect booster to a promising career and relationship. Focusing on body weight can make an individual achieve lifetime dreams; this is because people in the society will love you more. This sound absurd in the first place, but thin king critically will reveal the reality of the condition. This is unerringly what the media is passing to the public nowadays (Murat, Efsun, & Gui, 2005). As a matter of fact, body image has always been the main issue that concerns people of all ages, especially among young women. This is

because most women are naturally larger than supermodels or movie stars that we see on TV and magazines; hence, they adopt vegan and vegetarian diets to lose weight, mask off-putting eating habits, as well as maintain low body weight. However, based on media portrayal of an ideal body image, asserts that being thin and having low body weight is the means to success.

As a result of media portrayal, thinness makes some young women use various ways to lose weight, such as dieting, doing exercise, taking diet pills. In this case, eating less fat food and moderating amount of exercising can be beneficial, but some women may lose controls and pact with their weight issues in unhealthy and extreme ways (Weiss, et al, 2004). Consequently, in the process of dieting they may develop eating disorders such as Anorexia Nervosa and Bulimia Nervosa. These two types are psychological related eating disorders, which draws much attention in the society since they are difficult to take care of and have a high death rate among the patient. Perhaps, this serious disorder does not develop in a short period; it would be of great interest to focus at the early signs of this problem, and, maybe the changes of food preference can be a part of warning signs (Perry, 2001).

As stated, there is a group of people, called vegetarian. They may have diverse restrictions on their food choices, but generally, they do not eat animal related products and are very strict on their diet. Coren (2009) published an article on Times of London and says, vegetarianism is a better eating disorder as compared to others, this is because it does not increase fats in the body, and basically it does not cause death. The only problem is that it makes people flaky and pale, as well as tediousness. This may be a

radical stand to regard vegetarianism as a type of eating disorder. However, Coren addresses an interesting side of vegetarianism that the two may share some common characteristics and the side effects of vegetarianism are harder to be detected. Overall, understanding vegetarianism is more complex than it used to be.

Arguably, vegetarianism is a possible pathway to developing disorders such as Bulimia Nervosa and Anorexia Nervosa. The best way to argue this case is through the analysis of psychological, and physiological problems, as well as motivating factors to being a vegetarian. Based on physiological health, some people may argue that vegetarians have a healthy diet, and they have less health problems than meat eaters do. Thus, vegetarianism is a healthy eating habit that will never lead to eating disorders. For example, since vegetarians consume less fats they may have a lower risk of developing cardiovascular diseases. Nevertheless, research shows different outcomes. O'Brien (2009), through a research on a group of the teenager and young adults, examined the relationship between vegetarianism and weight-control behaviors. He found out that compared to meat eaters, previous vegetarians were at risk to engage in dangerous weight loss behaviors such as taking laxatives and current vegetarians may experience binge-eating behaviors. These are some of the behaviors can be found in eating disorders. Therefore, it could be evident from research that there are some connections between eating disorders and vegetarianisms (Perry, 2001).

Moreover, depending on the current physiological state of the person, many researches argue that vegetarianism may lead to various types of health

related problems, which will not occur among omnivores. Specifically, vegetarianism may cause more side effects on certain groups of people such as children and adolescent. On the developmental perspective, if a person became a vegetarian in a very young age, there may be deficits in nutrition, which can negatively influence the person's physical development or growth. For example, vegetarian diet may increase the risk of impaired growth, rickets and iron-deficiency anemia and deficits in Vitamin B-12 (Sanders, 1994).

In most cases, children and adolescents may not realize the stipulation to maintain a certain amount of nutrition. Hence, parents should develop a strategic healthy meal plan for their children. Otherwise, in the long term, some health risks will be unpredictable and may kill unnoticed. Undeniably, women during pregnancy and breastfeeding, nutrition provided by vegetables or fruits may not be enough for the healthy growth of their babies. The breast milk may lack certain unique nutritional components. For example, because of mother's vegetarian diet, a 6-month-old infant was diagnosed with serious megaloblastic anemia and neurologic damage due to deficits in vitamin B-12 (Weiss, 2004). In other words, pregnant women who maintain a long-term vegetarian diet can increase the risk of vitamin B-12 deficiency and vitamin B-12, which is closely related to infants' healthy development.

Athletes form another crucial group in this analysis. A large amount of energy is needed to maintain their daily physical training activities.

Venderley(2006) elaborates on the typical nutrition that athletes usually

need to support their performances. Nutrition such as iron, calcium and vitamin D are vital and may not be sufficient for vegetarian athletes because the main sources of the nutrition are from animal products. Besides, the possible side effects on children, adolescents, pregnant women, infants and athletes, people with certain diseases may need to consume meat regularly in order to maintain their well being. In other words, a well-planned diet is fundamental for vegetarians (Green-Finestone, 2008). People should consider their current health situation and then make their decisions wisely, because they cannot just quit animal related products right away after deciding to become vegetarians. Conceivably, being a vegetarian may not be necessarily healthier than non-vegetarians.

Moreover, vegetarians may present various psychological distress similar to the distress of eating disorders. According to a school based research in Ontario, Canada, adolescent vegetarians present poorer self-rated health, poorer social adjustment and high alcohol consumption, especially among female vegetarians (Greene-Finestone, 2008). These problems may be associated to social or behavioural risk factors of developing psychological related problems. For example, poor social adjustment and higher alcohol consumption may increase the risk of developing depression. A study carried out to examine the relationship between Turkish adolescents' eating attitudes and psychological factors, shows that female vegetarians demonstrate low self-esteem, distorted eating attitudes and high anxiety level when compared to non-vegetarians (Murat, 2005). Therefore, the presence of low self-esteem may be the reason for adoption vegetarianism.

Adolescents are undergoing puberty period, so their body shapes are changing. Especially for teenage girls, more body fat is building due to hormonal changes. In consequence, those who are particularly unconfident about their current body shape, may want to lose their weight right away. Becoming vegetarians can be an effective way, of which the distorted eating attitudes may be caused by their new diet. Besides low self-esteem, more severe effects may occur. For instance, a study carried out on 4, 746 high school students in Twin City Minnesota, concludes that vegetarian adolescents are more likely to report suicide attempts (Perry, 2001).

Meanwhile, suicide is the major cause of death among people with Anorexia Nervosa. Even though, the research does not show the reason of vegetarian adolescents' suicide attempts, it indicates some suicide related problems such as major depression disorders.

Generally, those psychological symptoms are all parts of the essential criteria to diagnose eating disorders in DSM-IV-TR, but only in less severe forms. Even though, these overlapped psychological problems do not necessarily prove that vegetarianism and eating disorders is the same thing, but the similarities show the possible links between the two. Thus, being a vegetarian does not simplify what we usually think and these distresses should not be presented in normal eating behaviors (Perry, 2001). In this scenario, the urge to maintain thin bodies may be the key component in adolescent vegetarians, which is similar to those with eating disorders. Thus, based on psychological related harms such as suicide attempts, and low self-esteem vegetarianism may represent the early stage of eating disorders.

Besides health related problems caused by vegetarianism, the motivation of becoming vegetarian present similar reasons of developing eating disorders. First, it is worthwhile to look at the changes in motivations of becoming vegetarians by analyzing the historical cases. In the past, most people were obligated vegetarians because of religious practice. For example, Buddhism, Hindu-based Hare Krishna and Christian Seventh-Day Adventists are some of the vegetarian religious groups that consider their diet as daily worship (Nath, 2010, p. 356). Some famous figure such as Gandhi, the leader of Indian independent movement, was a vegetarian due to his Buddhist belief in no killing and non-violence. Thus, as we can see, people in the past adopted such eating habit based on their religious beliefs.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, many people choose to be vegetarians for different reasons. Vegetarianism has become the new trend for beauty, as well as healthy lifestyles. For instance, some vegetarian celebrities may attribute their good skin and slim body to their diet. Thus, their fans may follow them to look as good as them. Also, the public tends to think that vegetarians care more about ecological environment or animal rights than most people do. Overall, vegetarians sent positive images to the public view, so more and more people shift from omnivore to vegetarians (Murat, Efsun, & Gui, 2005). As a result, being a vegetarian is believed to be more beneficial than being an omnivore. Since there are various factors such as peer pressure, parents' criticism and personality traits, which can influence people's eating behaviors, it is essential critically analyze the whole picture of vegetarianism and not be fooled by some appealing claims. Thus, in a critical view the main



motive for many vegetarian women to quit meat may well be to lose weight, which is characteristic coupled with eating disorders.

Some people may argue that individuals, especially women who become vegetarians are mainly due to their strong empathy towards animal, and do not intend to see animals suffering. However, based on some related research on vegetarians' attitude towards animals, this is not the case. A study carried out by Preylo and Arikawa (2008) to compared vegetarians and non-vegetarians' attitude and their empathy toward animals, showed that male vegetarians show much more empathy towards animals than non-vegetarian men. Female vegetarians, on the other hand, show no difference in terms of empathy when compared with non-vegetarian women. Based on the substantiation found in the research, we can conclude that indeed, female vegetarians are caring towards animals (Green-Finestone, et al, 2008). However, it may not be the key reason for their character to quit meat since non-vegetarian women also show the similar amount of love to animals. Moreover, non-vegetarian women eat meat regularly, it does not stand for their carelessness on animals. In addition, the fact that non-vegetarian male show less positive attitude to animal makes it clear that there may be some gender related characteristics contributing to the decision of becoming vegetarians (Silverman, 2010). In other words, if the affection towards animals is the only reason a person quits meat; there should be no difference between male groups and female groups. So many female vegetarians claim that the main reason they quit meat is the love for animals may not be true. Then, the big question is what is their main reason.

O'Brien's (2009) study of adolescent vegetarians' weight control suggests that many vegetarians are more interested in weight loss than protecting animals. Furthermore, some of them may use vegetarianism as an excuse to cover up their eating disorders since being a vegetarian is more up to standard. If this is the case, then many patients with eating disorders may be vegetarians. A teenage girl named Rebecca Tishman, who used to be a vegetarian and had been battling with eating disorders for years said that more than half girls who were under treatment were vegetarian. According to her, this was not a coincidence, many people use vegetarianism as a way to restrict (Robyn, P1. 2010).

Precisely, this is a serious problem considering that vegetarianism is used as a mask to swathe up the real stories among teenagers. Due to the social pressure and the media's influence on people's body image, females are generally more concerned about their body image than males. It seems that the same issue motivates those who develop an eating disorder. Since eating disorders do not appear overnight there must be different stages on a continuum interval. Basically, vegetarianism is less extreme and more socially acceptable than eating disorders. To conclude, the reason why young women became vegetarians is more likely related to losing weight other than the traditional belief of protecting animals. Becoming a vegetarian may be a process of developing severe eating disorders (Nath, 2010).

In the analysis, one thing that is decisive to point out is that the main purpose to recognize vegetarianism as a possible pathway to develop eating

disorders is not to accuse or attach vegetarians. Instead, the main aim is to create awareness on the general public to realize some of the hidden effects behind the common beliefs of vegetarianism, because everyone has different interpretations of vegetarians, which is mostly based on their beliefs and personal experiences.. If people overlook the side effects of becoming a vegetarian, and simply want to follow the trend without knowing any nutrition related knowledge, serious health problems may take place. Especially, for adolescents who are experiencing the puberty, they are defenseless both emotionally and physically (Willeford, 2000). As a result, parents or physicians should pay attention to adolescents who suddenly become vegetarians and take action to help them if they find or discover any unusual behavior.

Also, certain programs or teaching tools at school or community may help adolescents to make decisions on vegetarianism. For example, there is a program called “ decision case” is created by high school teacher in the states. Teachers address benefits and harm of being a vegetarian in different aspects. At the same time, the class teaches students how to prepare for vegetarianism meals and necessary nutrition that are needed to maintain good health (Willeford, 2000). Hence, students can have a full understanding of becoming a vegetarian and they can decide whether to continue or give up this special eating preference. Also, the media can promote this kind of programs by asking vegetarian celebrities to join them. Then, they can make some non-profit advertisements introduce the program to the public. Thus, more and more people, especially adolescents have access to adopt healthy diets no matter if they are vegetarians or not.

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Conclusively, more adolescent should get intervention in time or help to choose food appropriately so that it will not develop into serious eating disorders. In addition, more research need to be undertaken on the relationship between male and vegetarianism, this is because little research as been carried out. The research need to be compare male with female vegetarians in terms of psychological and physical health and the reasons for their vegetarianism. To sum up, losing weight and being thin has become the new trend under media's influence. As a result, these beliefs can reflect on people's eating habits. This paper argues that vegetarianism is a pathway of developing serious eating disorders by looking at vegetarians' physiological, psychological health and also the reason they adopt such behaviors. The findings suggest that vegetarianism can be an early stage of eating disorders. At last, recognizing the possible risk factors of vegetarianism and educating people on food choices may lower the rate of eating related problems and people can choose their food wisely.

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