

Vegetarianism – Part 3: The Economic and Taste Benefits of a Vegetarian Diet

by Gary Null, PhD, and Martin Feldman, MD

In Parts 1 and 2 of this series, we presented historical, philosophical, and nutritional perspectives on a vegetarian diet. This final installment discusses two of the more practical aspects of vegetarian eating: the economic advantages of choosing a plant-based diet and issues of personal taste that accompany a vegetarian diet.

Research indicates that vegetarian eating offers notable health benefits compared with a traditional meat-based diet. But in addition to these health benefits, a vegetarian diet offers monetary advantages as well. Many vegetarian foods cost far less than animal products, allowing consumers to cut their household expenses even as the cost of living rises steeply around them.

For the average consumer, the waning of the “Great American Steak Culture” is a blessing in disguise. Per capita beef consumption dropped from 72.1 pounds in 1980 to 62.4 pounds in 2005, a healthy reduction of 13.5%. Poultry consumption grew from 40.8 pounds to 73.6 pounds in the same time period.¹ Just as people have been turning away from high-priced beef and pork in favor of chicken and turkey, many may soon be drawn away from poultry and dairy foods in search of more economical alternatives. (Ironically, affluence may be more of a curse than a blessing if it enables the wealthy to indulge in meat, dairy, and highly refined foods

that can make them sluggish and sick.)

A vegetarian diet can offer substantial savings on food costs. One blogger has written that he was able to reduce his grocery expenses by \$3000 a year. In addition, the elimination of meat from the diet also may reduce one’s medical expenses. A *New York Times* article reports on a study showing that the medical costs of meat consumption may be similar to the tens of billions of dollars it costs per year to care for smokers.² Based on this estimate, which is likely to be conservative because the study was done 15 years ago, the extra household medical costs of eating meat (calculated on the 2004 census data of two to three people per household) would come to about \$334 to \$500.

The Lower Cost of Vegetarian Foods

The difference in cost between meat and plant foods may surprise many people. A 5.5-ounce steak, for example, supplies the same 20 grams of protein as 6²/₃ slices of whole-wheat bread. But a consumer may pay more than five times the price for steak, a food that does not rival its cheaper counterpart in terms of nutritional value and fiber content.

The high cost of animal foods is fairly easy to understand. The nutrients needed to sustain life ultimately come from plant foods. People obtain these nutrients in one of two ways: either directly, by eating the plant food itself,

or indirectly, by eating the animal that was fed on the plant food. When they consume meat, poultry, and dairy products, they are eating higher on the food chain than when they consume grains and vegetables.

It is far more economical to choose foods from lower on the food chain and obtain nutrients directly from vegetables and grains. Consumers who obtain their nutrients secondhand from animal products pay for them many times over. When they buy beef, for example, they are paying for the grains fed to the animal; the rancher’s overhead; the animal’s slaughter; and the processing, packaging, and transporting of the meat. Clearly, the more economical option is to eat the plant foods directly.

The production of clothing illustrates this difference: A sweater purchased in a consumer’s hometown would be a cheaper option than one produced by sending the wool to a distant factory; combining it with synthetic fabrics; designing the sweater; sending it through an assembly line; folding, pinning, and transporting it to a wholesale distributor in yet another distant city; and finally shipping it to a retail outlet right back in the consumer’s hometown. The same philosophy applies to animal foods: It is economically unsound and wasteful it is to have one’s nutrients “processed” through an animal rather than obtaining them directly from the nutrient “loom,” the vegetable or grain itself.

To take it a step further, consider the societal rather than personal perspective in this economic equation. Large amounts of meat and dairy products are imported to the US to satisfy the demand for animal foods. Farm equipment, fertilizers, and petroleum also must be imported to support domestic animal agriculture. If even a fraction of the resources represented by those massive expenses were released, they could help solve pressing national and international problems. Just as the money saved by individual vegetarians helps improve their standard of living, the national savings that would be realized from a large-scale adoption of vegetarianism could help tackle critical national and global issues.

The fact is, animal foods are inordinately high in fat and cholesterol, which greatly increase the risk of atherosclerosis, heart disease, and other degenerative disorders. These foods also contain an array of antibiotics and hormones if they are not organically produced. More than half of the nation's annual antibiotic production goes to livestock and poultry.

Growing Low-Cost Foods

Another cost benefit of a vegetarian diet is that consumers can grow their own fresh produce. Sprouts, for example, are extremely inexpensive to grow and can be produced anywhere, even indoors.

Sprouts are low in calories, easily digested, and rich in nutrients, such as B-complex vitamins. They provide energy and protein and can be used as a viable meat substitute when combined properly with other foods. Sprouts are delicious as a snack and can be added to main dishes, casseroles, soups, and salads.

Two methods of growing sprouts are outlined below, followed by a sprouting chart that details the amount of dry seeds, grains, or beans to use and their individual sprouting times. The container used for the sprouting should allow enough room for an increase of five to eight times the size of the original material.

The simplest method is to grow the sprouts in a jar. The items needed include: (a) wide-mouth jar, (b) rubber band, (c) wire screen, cheesecloth, or clean nylon stocking, and (d) whole seed, bean, or grain. Here are the steps to take:

- Soak the seeds in water overnight, using approximately twice as much water as dry seed.
- Drain the water from the jar through the screen or cloth and rinse the seeds well.
- Turn the jar upside down at an angle and place it in a bowl, pot, or wire stand. Put this in a dark, temperate place.
- Rinse the seeds through the screen twice daily if the weather is cool or mild, and three times daily during the summer. During this time, keep the jar inverted and gently shake the seeds to distribute them evenly around the walls of the jar.

The other method calls for soaking the seeds in a pan, again using approximately twice as much water as dry material. After the second day, spread the seeds thinly and

evenly on the bottom of a glass or screen tray or even a straw basket. Sprinkle generously with water two to three times daily. Cover with a wet cheesecloth or paper towel.

Most sprouts are ready to use when they are one-fourth to one-half inch long. When they have developed to the desired length, put them in a closed jar or plastic container and store them in the refrigerator. If properly covered, they will keep for a few days like other fresh vegetables.

Issues of Personal Taste

Although people may initially turn to a vegetarian diet to reduce their food costs, they soon find themselves developing a taste for these foods. Items that may taste strange at first will begin to taste good over time.

Personal taste guides much of what people do, including the art, music, and literature they enjoy; the cars they buy; and even the political choices they make. Dietary choices also are largely a matter of personal taste, and the foods that a person eats and the ways in which he or she prepares them indicate who that person is.



Sprouting Chart

Type	Soaking Time	Rinse/Drain (times per day)	Sprouting Time	Amt. in Qt. Jar
Alfalfa seeds	12 hrs. (overnight)	2	3 days	3 tbs.
Buckwheat	12 hrs.	3	5 days	5 tbs.
Fenugreek seeds	12 hrs.	3	4 days	3 tbs.
Garbanzo beans	12 hrs.	2	3 days	1 cup
Lentils	12 hrs.	2	3 days	10 tbs.
Mung beans	12 hrs.	2	3 days	6 tbs.
Mustard seeds	None	3	4 days	3 tbs.
Radish seeds	12 hrs.	3	5 days	3 tbs.
Red clover seeds	12 hrs.	2	4 days	3 tbs.
Rye	12 hrs.	3	3 days	5 tbs.
Soybeans	24 hrs.	3	4 days	1 cup
Sunflower seeds	12 hrs.	3	5 days	8 tbs.
Wheat	12 hrs.	2	3 days	5 tbs.

Vegetarianism

Individuals can express themselves creatively by preparing meals that include a wide variety of natural flavors and textures, or they can express themselves unimaginatively by limiting their choices to only the flavors, spices, and textures to which they are accustomed. If they always consume the same foods, they are missing out on the fun, the adventure (and yes, the risks) of new experiences and are depriving themselves of the opportunity to explore more healthful and surprisingly tasty ways of eating.

Gastronomy, the art of eating well, is designed to please the senses, primarily taste and vision. Rarely does it take into account the fundamental reason that people eat: to receive nutrition. Most people overlook the nutritional aspects of food preparation in favor of the gastronomical. Everyone would do well to cultivate the art and science of preparing *nutritious* foods.

In terms of vegetarian cuisine, many people have been convinced that preparing such foods is a dreary, unimaginative ordeal. The image of vegetarians as people who eat bland broths with dried crusts of pumpernickel bread, or iceberg lettuce leaves topped with tasteless soybeans or sprouts, is outmoded. Yet some people cling stubbornly to such misconceptions. Perhaps it is neither ignorance nor prejudice that drives these ideas but rather simple resistance to changing a lifestyle that dates from one's earliest memories.

Dietary habits are strongly linked to self-image, and the thought of radically altering lifelong eating patterns may simply be too unsettling for some. If people could be more rational and less emotional when examining their eating habits, it might well increase their chances of enjoying long, healthy lives.

Junk-food offenders undoubtedly will find it difficult to enjoy wholesome grains and vegetables initially. They have conditioned their bodies, through repeated use and overuse, to prefer refined and chemically treated foods. In addition, these people probably have not had to chew their foods well in the past. Foods that are refined require little effort to swallow, especially when chased down with liquids. Eating good, fibrous foods may annoy these people as they search for familiar tastes. The more they try them, however, the more their bodies will adapt to the tastes and textures. Eventually it will become a surprisingly pleasant sensory experience for them, and their bodies will obtain the nutrients that they crave.

There are many fine vegetarian cookbooks and periodicals that can help people make this transition. In general, vegetarian foods should be whole, natural, and prepared so that their unique and subtle flavors are allowed to present themselves gently. Unlike meat, poultry, or processed foods, vegetarian dishes should not be heavy or overbearing, but rather subtle and balanced. They should be eaten to enhance and perpetuate life.

Taste as a Healing Mechanism

The sense of taste is an innate mechanism that will assist people with healthful eating, if they pay attention to it. In the Western view, there are four basic tastes – sweet, salty, sour, and bitter – recognized by the taste buds in the mouth. The sense of smell also helps people to appreciate flavor, while the senses of sight and touch influence their perception of food. The senses help people not only to select and enjoy foods but also to avoid nonfoods and dangerous foods, such as those that may be spoiled or poisoned.

One view on the role of the senses in health comes from Ayurvedic medicine. According to this ancient healing system, our senses also lead us to the specific foods, nutrients, textures, and qualities that are appropriate for our balance and health at any given time, and thereby help us avoid foods that might be problematic. Taste is not static, but rather adapts to the body's ever-changing needs.³

Ayurvedic medicine dates back to ancient India, circa 1000 BC, when a medical specialist named Charak and a surgeon named Susruta cowrote two texts describing the system. Known as "life's knowledge," from the Sanskrit root words *ayu* and *veda*, the Ayurvedic system dealt with many aspects of medicine, including toxicology, pediatrics, and gynecology. Its healing principle – little studied or understood in the West – goes beyond the simple diagnosis of disease and treatment of symptoms. The dual focus is on uncovering and remedying the root causes of illness through a total approach of mental, physical, and spiritual discipline.⁴ If a person has a cold, for example, this approach might include an investigation of his attitude toward work, a detailed review of his diet, and even an evaluation of his feelings about his purpose in life and relationship to nature. A Western approach might be purely symptom-oriented: Give the patient two aspirin and send him to bed. If the stuffy nose and runny eyes clear up, he's cured.



Gary Null has authored more than 75 books on health and nutrition and numerous articles published in research journals. He is adjunct professor, Graduate Studies, Public Health Curriculum, at Fairleigh Dickinson University in Teaneck, New Jersey. Null holds a PhD in human nutrition and public health science from the Union Graduate School.

Martin Feldman practices complementary medicine. He is an assistant clinical professor of neurology at the Mount Sinai School of Medicine in New York City.

Vegetarianism

The Ayurvedic system holds that there are six basic tastes, including the four known in the West (sweet, salty, sour, and bitter) and two others: pungent and astringent.⁵ If you are dining at a Mexican restaurant and unwittingly bite into a jalapeno pepper, you may suddenly feel as if smoke is going to pour from your ears. You have just received the message that this food is extremely pungent. Anyone who has ever puckered when sampling pickled cucumbers has experienced astringency. While these particular cues may be hard to miss, most tastes are far subtler, challenging people to be ever more attentive to what they are telling us about the body's requirements for total health and balance.

The body neither knows nor cares whether you have a Western or Eastern perception of the universe – it has its own intelligence. If you bite into a bean taco with tofu dressing in a blue-corn shell, for instance, you are stimulating many senses simultaneously. Sight, smell, and taste all cooperate to cue your body to begin digesting the food. Specific enzymes are secreted to help assimilate the food that you've ingested. The more wholesome and nutritionally balanced the food, the more uncomplicated the process of enzyme secretion. Rich foods, processed flours, heavy sweets, and fatty meats make digestion a chore instead of a simple, normal biological activity.

Understanding what the body is communicating begins in the mouth, where digestion starts. Chewing releases enzymes that break down food particles, releasing a variety of flavors. Therefore, to best "understand" what foods are communicating through the stimulation of their taste buds, people should chew thoroughly and thoughtfully. This process will offer extra benefits as well, allowing them to digest properly. Chewing slowly also helps people keep their body weight under control because they feel full faster and eat less.

While wholesome vegetarian foods offer many interesting smells, flavors,

and textures when they are chewed, overprocessed and junk foods only confuse the body. Because they require very little chewing, the tendency is to eat far more in far less time, taking in huge amounts of empty calories that are stored as fat. People may confuse the body even further by trying to make these denatured, monotaste foods more interesting by heaping salt, sugar, ketchup, mayonnaise, butter, and other worthless or harmful additives on them. It is not difficult to see how the onslaught of fried fast foods, artificially colored and sugary soft drinks, and chemically fabricated "milk" shakes lead us to obesity and disease.

Conclusion

There are many sound reasons for adopting a vegetarian lifestyle, including the economical and taste benefits. And remember, the lower cost of vegetarian foods is only a bonus. The most significant benefit is that people receive more of what the body needs in terms of nutrients, roughage, and balance, and less of what it cannot tolerate in the form of saturated fats, cholesterol, chemical additives, hormones, and nitrates.

Of course, there is considerable opposition to the vegetarian lifestyle, primarily from powerful agribusinesses, which brings us to a crossroads. Each person has a choice to make. Will he or she support the interests of the agribusinesses, or will

he or she become more independent and self-sufficient and embrace the more healthful alternative? Those who choose vegetarianism, regardless of their reasons for doing so, are likely to discover that it offers benefits that they never anticipated at the start.

Correspondence

Gary Null, PhD
2307 Broadway
New York, New York 10024

Martin Feldman, MD
132 East 76th Street
New York, New York 10021
e-mail: precisemd@aol.com

Notes

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