

National Vegetarian Week 23rd – 29th May 2011

A vegetarian or vegan diet can have many benefits. Some people choose to adopt a vegetarian lifestyle because of environmental considerations or ethical objection to the mistreatment of animals. Others chose the vegetarian diet for health reasons.

National Vegetarian Week is an excellent opportunity for people to be made more aware of the environmental and ethical consequences of their food choices. Additionally, it is a great chance to encourage those who primarily intake meat, dairy and processed foods to bring some variation into their diet. It doesn't have to be purely about converting people to vegetarianism, but rather about bringing moderation into the diet. Research suggests that replacing one meat-based meal a week with healthful vegetables and vegetable protein sources can be an improvement both for one's health and for the environment. The World Wildlife Fund in conjunction with the Rowett Institute of Nutrition and Health (University of Aberdeen) has launched the *Livewell Report – a balance of healthy and sustainable food choices*. The report recommends lower intakes of meat and greater protein intake from plant sources, based on recommendations issued by the World Cancer Research Fund.

Those who become vegetarian for ethical rather than health reasons are often not aware of their changed dietary requirements. Most people do not think to visit a Nutritional Therapist until they have a health problem to resolve, and so education ideally needs to be provided on a wider, accessible platform. National Vegetarian Week can be one such way to raise awareness of a healthy food intake for people who follow a strict vegan or vegetarian diet.

The typical pitfalls to be aware of are as follows:

- Excessive starchy and refined carbohydrate intake

It is common for veggies to rely on starchy and refined carbohydrates such as potatoes, pasta and rice. Instead, primarily choose wholegrain foods such as brown rice, oats, millet, quinoa, and change to wholemeal bread and pasta.

- Insufficient protein intake

Often meals are based purely around carbohydrates. It is important to include protein with every meal and to use a broad variety of proteins, as most vegetable proteins aren't complete. These include beans, lentils, tofu, nuts and seeds and avocado.

- Insufficient fat intake

Individuals who don't eat fish miss the Omega-3 DHA and EPA found in oily fish. They therefore must be conscious of including plant oils which contain Omega-3 such as flax and hemp seeds. Additionally they may choose to take an algae oil supplement, which contains the same healthful DHA and EPA as fish oil.

- Vitamin B12

This can be missed, particularly in vegans, as it is only found in animal food sources. A common misunderstanding is that vegans can take B12 from green algae but according to The Vegan Society these sources have been shown to be inadequate and several studies of raw food vegans have shown that raw food offers no special protection against B12 deficiency. Therefore if little or no animal foods are eaten, it is essential that a supplement be used.

Provided care is taken to include all the macronutrients and a wide variety of colourful vegetables and fruit to broadly cover the micronutrients, a vegetarian diet can be wonderfully healthy. National Vegetarian Week will hopefully introduce more people to the lovely variety of wholesome international foods that can be enjoyed by vegetarians and non-vegetarians alike!

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