



Eating Disorders and Vegan, Vegetarian and Plant-Based Diets

At EDV we often get asked questions around eating disorders and vegan or vegetarian diets such as *'Is there a relationship between eating a vegan/vegetarian diet and risk of developing an eating disorder?'* and *'Is it possible to follow a vegan/vegetarian diet when in recovery for an eating disorder (especially when there is a need to weight restore)?'*

This information will help answer these questions, as well as tips on how to support a person with an eating disorder who wishes not to consume animal products. For information about specific nutritional requirements for vegans and vegetarians, please see our **Nutritional requirements for vegans and vegetarians** factsheet.

Definitions

Vegan: a person who does not eat any food derived from animals and who typically does not use other animal products for any other purpose (including clothing). Typically a person who eats a vegan diet will abstain from all foods from an animal origin including meat, fish, dairy, eggs and even honey and gelatin.

Vegetarian: a person who does not eat meat or fish, and sometimes other animal products especially for moral, religious or health reasons. Generally, vegetarians will eat dairy (pesco) and eggs (ovo). Some will also eat fish (pesco) or chicken (pollo).

Plant-based: a diet consisting mostly or entirely of plant-based foods.

Both vegan and vegetarian diets are examples of plant-based diets. Another term that is often used is flexitarian, which can mean a person who will eat meat or animal products only on certain occasions.

Omnivore: a person who eats a variety of food of both plant and animal origin.

Our changing dietary preferences

The number of Australians choosing to eat a vegetarian or vegan diet is on the rise. Research in 2018 found that there are 2.5 million people (12.5%) who are all or almost all vegetarian – this is up from just 1.7 million (9%) in 2012. Of these, it is estimated that 500,000 are vegan (about 2% of the population).

There are a variety of reasons a person might choose to eat a vegan, vegetarian or plant-based diet – these can be religious, ethical, environmental or for the potential health benefits of eating more plant foods.¹ When a person follows a vegan or vegetarian diet because it is closely aligned with their values it can provide a sense of purpose and fulfillment. A nutritionally aware and supplemented, vegan or vegetarian diet is supported by the Australian Dietary Guidelines for adults and can be followed long-term with no negative health impacts.²

How can veganism be related to eating disorders?

Unfortunately, some people become attracted to vegetarianism and veganism as a way to reduce calories and food intake. This is a warning sign that the person may have disordered eating practices and be at risk of developing an eating disorder. If dietary omissions are occurring to serve eating disorder patterns of rigidity and restriction, or from a place of fear, it is important to find out why.

There is evidence that more people with eating disorders report being vegetarian or vegan compared to the rest of the population.³⁻⁵ This does not mean that being vegetarian or vegan causes an eating disorder but there definitely is a relationship and it may be a contributing factor for some people. Anytime a person starts cutting out certain foods from their diet or becomes overly preoccupied with food and eating there is a risk of developing disordered eating and/or an eating disorder.

So how do you know when it is a potential problem?

The key to understanding someone's choice to become either vegan or vegetarian is to have a conversation to find out what the reasons are for this decision. People may be good at describing their reasons based on ethical thinking yet when further questions are asked will often identify that the choice is also about a desire to reduce calorie intake. Some warning signs are:

- Other food rules or restrictions in addition to the veganism or vegetarianism (such as sugar, gluten, processed foods etc.).
- Refusal to eat vegan versions of 'fun foods' such as vegan pizza, burgers, ice cream.
- Other eating disorder behaviours such as bingeing or excessive exercise.
- Refusal to find non-animal sources of animal fats and proteins and any supplementation required.
- Disinterest in discussing the ethics of veganism or no evidence of making any other lifestyle changes to accommodate veganism other than eating habits.

Some questions to consider asking are:

- What is the reason you started a vegan or vegetarian diet? If vegan, would you consider eating a vegetarian diet (including eggs and dairy)? (Purpose is to explore motivations for the diet restrictions and understanding of nutrition requirements – can they articulate reasons and is it values orientated or fear-based?).
- What thoughts or reactions come up for you if you consider increasing your range of food choices or challenging your vegan or vegetarian diet? (Can help explore values orientated response compared to fear-based).
- Have you made any other lifestyle changes (such as clothing choices) to align with a vegan philosophy?

Veganism, weight restoration and eating disorder recovery

It is certainly possible to maintain a vegan or vegetarian diet and restore weight during recovery from an eating disorder but there are several important factors to consider. This includes ensuring that the person's nutritional needs (type and quantity of essential nutrients) are met as well as considering the volume of food required to meet calorie needs without causing gastrointestinal (GI) distress (plant foods often contain a lot of fibre and when eaten in large quantities can cause bloating, gas and changes in bowel habits in some people).

Depending on the range of foods consumed, some vegan and vegetarian diets can lack nutrients – so it is important to ensure that a recovery meal plan is well thought out and supplemented where necessary. Please see our accompanying factsheet, *Nutritional requirements for vegans and vegetarians*, to learn more.

The other major consideration is ensuring the foods provide adequate calories for weight restoration in portion sizes that are realistic and manageable to digest. Plant foods can provide the same calories and essential nutrients as animal foods but sometimes the quantity required can be much higher. For example, you would need to eat 6 cups of broccoli for the same amount of protein that is in 2 eggs or around 15 cups of kale for the equivalent protein in a chicken breast.⁶

Animal foods also tend to be higher in fat content, which means they are higher in calories, which is important when undertaking weight restoration.

Due to these complicating factors, the need for good dietetic support and the possibility of additional medical concerns, many in-patient units will not allow patients to remain vegan or vegetarian whilst engaging in weight restoration.

Key takeaways

- It is important to thoroughly understand a person's true motivation for eating a vegetarian or vegan diet to ensure it is not coming from a place of fear or a desire to restrict or reduce food intake.
- People who eat a completely vegan diet and some vegetarian diets require careful nutritional guidance and lifelong supplementation of some essential nutrients.
- Despite these challenges it is possible to go through eating disorder recovery and/or weight restore on a vegan or vegetarian diet but to do so properly requires professional support and resources which may not always be provided or easily available.

Don't forget EDV is here to help

If you are concerned about yourself or someone else, EDV are here to listen and help. Contact the EDV Hub on 1300 550 236 between 9.30am – 4.30pm, Monday – Friday or email edv@eatingdisorders.org.au

References

For the full list of references please see the accompanying reference page.

¹ Plant-based eating has been associated with lower risk of chronic diseases such as heart disease, type-2 diabetes and certain cancers. There is however a lack of research on complete vegan or vegetarian diets. The current evidence indicates that diets that are simply higher in plant foods and lower in animal foods show the greatest benefits. More research is required in this area to be able to make more detailed diet recommendations. Some recent review papers include:

- Kim, Hyunju, Caulfield, Laura E, Garcia-Larsen, Vanessa, Steffen, Lyn M, Coresh, Josef, & Rebholz, Casey M. (2019). Plant-Based Diets Are Associated With a Lower Risk of Incident Cardiovascular Disease, Cardiovascular Disease Mortality, and All-Cause Mortality in a General Population of Middle-Aged Adults. *Journal of the American Heart Association*, 8(16)
- Molina-Montes, Esther, Salamanca-Fernández, Elena, Garcia-Villanova, Belén, & Sánchez, María José. (2020). The Impact of Plant-Based Dietary Patterns on Cancer-Related Outcomes: A Rapid Review and Meta-Analysis. *Nutrients*, 12(7), 2010.
- Fehér, András, Gazdecki, Michał, Véha, Miklós, Szakály, Márk, & Szakály, Zoltán. (2020). A Comprehensive Review of the Benefits of and the Barriers to the Switch to a Plant-Based Diet. *Sustainability (Basel, Switzerland)*, 12(10), 4136.
- Qian, Frank, Liu, Gang, Hu, Frank B, Bhupathiraju, Shilpa N, & Sun, Qi. (2019). Association Between Plant-Based Dietary Patterns and Risk of Type 2 Diabetes: A Systematic Review and Meta-analysis. *JAMA Internal Medicine*, 179(10), 1335-1344.

² **The Australian Dietary Guidelines** (ADG), developed by the Australian Government National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) provide up-to-date advice about the amount and kinds of foods that we need to eat for health and wellbeing. The recommendations are based on scientific evidence, developed after looking at good quality research. On page 35 of the full guideline document the position statement regarding vegetarian or vegan dietary patterns states: *“Appropriately planned vegetarian diets, including total vegetarian or vegan diets, are healthy and nutritionally adequate. Well-planned vegetarian diets are appropriate for individuals during all stages of the lifecycle. Those following a strict vegetarian or vegan diet can meet nutrient requirements as long as energy needs are met and an appropriate variety of plant foods are eaten throughout the day. Those following a vegan diet should choose foods to ensure adequate intake of iron and zinc and to optimise the absorption and bioavailability of iron, zinc and calcium. Supplementation of vitamin B12 may be required for people with strict vegan dietary patterns”*.

³ Brytek-Matera, Anna, Brytek-Matera, Anna, Czepczor-Bernat, Kamila, Czepczor-Bernat, Kamila, Jurzak, Helena, Jurzak, Helena, . . . Kołodziejczyk, Natalia. (2019). Strict health-oriented eating patterns (orthorexic eating behaviours) and their connection with a vegetarian and vegan diet. *Eating and Weight Disorders*, 24(3), 441-452.

⁴ Sergentanis, Theodoros N, Chelmi, Maria-Eleni, Liampas, Andreas, Yfanti, Chrysanthi-Maria, Panagouli, Eleni, Vlachopapadopoulou, Elpis, Tsitsika, Artemis. (2020). Vegetarian Diets and Eating Disorders in Adolescents and Young Adults: A Systematic Review. *Children (Basel)*, 8(1), 12.

⁵ Dorard, Géraldine, & Mathieu, Sasha. (2021). Vegetarian and omnivorous diets: A cross-sectional study of motivation, eating disorders, and body shape perception. *Appetite*, 156, *Appetite*, 2021-01-01, Vol.156.

⁶ Food Standards Australia and New Zealand (FSANZ) Australian Food Composition Database, 2019. <https://www.foodstandards.gov.au/science/monitoringnutrients/afcd/Pages/foodsearch.aspx>

For further information

- Dieticians Australia – Vegan diets: everything you need to know <https://dietitiansaustralia.org.au/smart-eating-for-you/smart-eating-fast-facts/healthy-eating/vegan-diets-facts-tips-and-considerations/>
- Nutrition Australia – Plant-based diets what the fuss? <https://nutritionaustralia.org/division/nsw/plant-based-diets-whats-the-fuss/>
- Centre for Clinical Interventions
- Eating Disorders and Vegetarian Diets
- Australian Dietary Guidelines <https://www.eatforhealth.gov.au/>
- Vegan Australia <https://www.veganaustralia.org.au/>