

Are vegetarians healthier than meat-eaters? So NOT, according to shocking new studies

The popular view these days is that vegetarians live longer and are healthier than their meat-eating counterparts. Sometimes, when taking a dietary history with a new patient, they will say apologetically “I’m trying to cut down on my red meat,” as if that were the sine qua non of nutritional virtue.

This season, new books with vegetarian themes abound: T. Colin Campbell, the author of *The China Study*, has penned two new volumes—*Whole: Rethinking the Science of Nutrition* and the provocatively-titled *The Low-Carb Fraud*. He is Director of the T. Colin Campbell Center for Nutrition Studies in partnership with Cornell University, offering certificates in “Plant-based Studies.”



Caldwell Esselstyn Jr. is dietary guru to Bill Clinton and collaborated with Campbell on the popular documentary *Forks Over Knives—How a Plant-Based Diet Can Save America*.

And then there’s *The Starch Solution*, by Dr. John McDougall.

We’ve already done our due diligence in review of the outsized vegetarian diet claims and I would highly recommend the website Raw Food SOS for a critical analysis of Colin Campbell’s dubious conclusions.

Just this month, two big new studies push back against assertions of the superiority of the vegetarian diet.

Vegetarians Are Sicker

The first, “The Association Between Eating Behaviors and Various Health Parameters,” suggests that vegetarians may actually be sicker than meat eaters.

The authors state that, “Overall, vegetarians are in a poorer state of health compared to the other dietary habit groups. Concerning self-reported health, vegetarians differ significantly from each of the other groups, toward poorer health. Moreover, these subjects report higher levels of impairment from disorders. Vegetarians additionally report more chronic diseases than those eating a carnivorous diet less rich in meat. Significantly more vegetarians suffer from allergies, cancer, and mental health ailments (anxiety, or depression) than the other dietary habit groups.”

Specifically, there was a twofold increase in mental disorders (anxiety/depression) among vegetarians; cancer, osteoporosis, asthma and allergies, migraines and overall chronic conditions were about 50 percent higher; and, surprisingly, the vegetarian diet conferred no significant protection against heart attacks and strokes.

The authors themselves admit that a weakness of the study might be that some already-sick individuals may turn to a vegetarian diet to reverse their health problems. Alternatively, vegetarians may exhibit a higher degree of neuroticism or disease-phobia, skewing the findings on mental disorders.

Nevertheless they appropriately observe: “While, generally speaking, diets based on plants, like vegetarian diets, seem to be associated with a certain health benefit, a lower risk to contract certain chronic diseases, and the ability to improve health, restrictive and monotonous vegetarian diets include the risk of nutritional deficits.”

The other fly in the ointment for the vegetarian hypothesis came this month in the form of a study that refutes the saturated fat-heart disease connection.

First, our Word of the Day: shibboleth. A shibboleth is an outmoded or mistaken belief that is tenaciously clung to and is emblematic of a certain group.

Such is the saturated fat-heart disease connection, dutifully reinforced by such mainstream medicine eminences as the hidebound American Heart Association.

Review Questions Effects of Saturated Fats on Heart Disease

Dr. Rajiv Chowdhury, from the University of Cambridge in the UK, led the study that was published in the *Annals of Internal Medicine*. He and his colleagues collected data from 72 previously published studies of more than 600,000 people from 18 countries.

Their research showed that relative intake of saturated fats made no difference in heart disease risk.

On the other hand, trans-fat intake, as we have so often reiterated, prompted an increased likelihood of heart disease in this study.

(Earlier this month, yet another study demonstrated that the oft-repeated advice to replace saturated fats with polyunsaturated vegetable oils not only did not prevent heart risk, it increased it!)

This is not to say that we shouldn't be consuming plenty of plant-based foods—especially polyphenol-rich fruits and vegetables, nuts and seeds, legumes and, for those who tolerate them, whole grains. The problem is that poor-quality starch- and sugar-laden vegetarian diets often promote insulin resistance and skimp on protein, omega-3 fatty acids, and the healthy vitamins and minerals that are concentrated in fish, poultry and meat.

And, nutrigenomics may account for the fact that some people seem to do fine with a vegetarian diet, even a strict vegan diet. But for many, eating just plants is a genetic and evolutionary mismatch. Eventually, genetic testing may help us predict who is well-suited to a low-fat vegetarian regimen, but the science is not yet ready for prime time, despite what fans of “blood-type diets” and other metabolic-typing schemes may tell you.

Suffice it to say, the majority of us are designed to be omnivorous. The biggest downside of meat is the predominance of factory-farmed, hormone-, antibiotic- and pesticide-tainted, processed, grain-fed varieties. Therefore, consider sources such as [USA Wellness Meats](#) for your animal protein needs, or shop at farmers' markets and natural food stores for grass-fed, organic products.