

VEGETARIANISM - WHY IT'S GOOD FOR THE ENVIRONMENT, ANIMALS, AND YOU, TOO!

INTERVIEW WITH
PHYSICIANS COMMITTEE FOR RESPONSIBLE MEDICINE

If you are a person who eats – and it's a pretty safe bet that you are – then you have a natural interest in knowing the facts about what you eat. The old saying, you are what you eat, is demonstrably true. Whatever we ingest has an effect upon us, for good or for ill, so the more wisely we choose our comestibles, the healthier we are likely to be.

With much scientific research concluding that eating meat and dairy products is harmful to human health in many ways, increasing numbers of people are opting for a plant-based diet. They are turning to vegetarianism and veganism not only to avoid the heart disease, diabetes, and cancers that are more likely with animal-based foods, but in many cases because of an ethical awakening to the cruelty that is part of raising animals for consumption. Plus, the realization that the ecology of the entire planet is being irretrievably harmed by the destructive agricultural practices associated with livestock.

It may appear difficult to adopt a lifestyle in opposition to the dominant paradigm of mainstream culture. Popular media are continually blaring slogans that serve the interests of the meat and dairy industry – “Beef. It's what's for dinner.” “Pork. The other white meat.” “Endless shrimp buffet,” and other advertising propaganda. The committed vegetarian or vegan may in the past have sometimes felt as if he or she was perceived as a bit weird for bucking the trend. But today there is plenty of support for that choice, both moral and practical, from many progressive organizations.

To take just one example, the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine has been weighing in on the subject for decades. Among the diverse health issues that PCRM studies are the ways in which our choice of foods affects us.

PCRM is a non-profit organization headquartered in Washington, D.C. Established in 1985 by Neal Barnard, M.D., PCRM influences advancements in medicine and science. Their membership includes 150,000 health care professionals, including 12,000 physicians, and concerned citizens.

Wildlife Watch spoke with Joseph Gonzales, R.D., who has developed nutritional plans for several health organizations, including Image Reborn, a retreat for women with breast cancer, and discussed how a plant-based diet can be instrumental in survival. Gonzales has worked with PCRM for four years. As a Registered Dietitian, Gonzales has established validated dietary guidelines for cancer prevention and survival based on the latest research in nutrition and preventive medicine.

“We promote food, not drugs or supplements but healthy food. That is what the body needs to fight disease. I'm not against pills, but only when needed. Drugs have side effects, and they only treat symptoms, not the roots of disease.

“Nutrition has a great impact on diabetes, cancer, and heart disease. When you add excess weight it accelerates all the illnesses. More weight brings greater risk. Less weight lowers risk.”

All of the foods that PCRM recommends boost metabolism, regulate hormones or reduce excess hormones, and remove cholesterol. And these desirable outcomes can often be accomplished with well-planned vegan diets instead of drugs.

“We run our own clinical research looking at weight loss, rheumatoid arthritis pain, migraines, and diabetes. We have seen first-hand that a vegan diet is instrumental in reducing the effects of these illnesses.”



Joseph Gonzales, R.D.

To encourage a healthy vegan diet and show how easy it can be to start, PCRM has created the "Power Plate," a simple graph of 4 food groups: fruits, grains, legumes, and vegetables. Combining these four foods provides all the nutrition we need, without consuming any animal-derived products.



The Power Plate

The Power Plate website offers a number of flavorful recipes suitable

for every taste that utilize these wholesome foods. <http://thepowerplate.org>

Beside the fact that there are numerous delicious meals possible, Gonzales said that the quantity of food is not an issue. "The body knows when to stop," he noted.

PCRM has petitioned the USDA to change from their confusing "Food Pyramid" to the easier to understand Power Plate model. The giant meat and dairy industry lobbies have considerable influence over our government agencies, but if enough citizens make their voices heard in favor of switching from the outdated, unhealthy pyramid to the Power Plate, what a boon that would be to the well-being of future generations!

Motivations for going vegan range from improved personal health to protection of the environment, to world hunger, to a passion for animals. Whatever one's social and political values may be, achieving and maintaining good health is a benefit virtually everyone agrees on. As Gonzales pointed out, "Most people realize what is truly important in the world: children, family, and their health. They naturally want to live as healthy a life as possible."

In recent years, there has been a noticeable increase in Alzheimer Disease, and some of this can be traced to a diet that includes too much saturated fat. A study by the National Institutes of Health concluded that, "High intake of unsaturated, un-hydrogenated fats may be protective against Alzheimer disease, whereas intake of saturated or trans-unsaturated (hydrogenated) fats may increase risk."

Since the main sources of saturated fats are animal products, "It just makes sense to leave them out," Gonzales stated.

Consuming dairy and meat products stimulates hormone production. We do need hormones, of course, but not in excess. Some cancers, for example, can be fuelled by excess hormones. www.nytimes.com/2006/12/26/health/26horm.html

Another aspect of poor health is the presence of inflammation. "We want to have a cool body. But you can't cool down the body by taking in animal products. You cool it with fruits and beans and especially lots of greens. Leafy greens quench free radical damage, and they boost the body's DNA repair system. They fight the growth of cancer. The only foods that have been shown to do that are of plant origin. Fruits, vegetables, legumes, lentils – put them all together and you are giving yourself a shield against potential invaders."

Proponents of vegetarian and vegan lifestyles can take heart that the current zeitgeist appears to be heading their way. Health professionals in many countries are recognizing and advocating for the benefits of eliminating meat and dairy products. More favorable articles are being written, even in mainstream publications. When asked if he has experienced much resistance to his forward-thinking nutritional principles, Gonzales acknowledged that, "Any time you are trying to change the norm you will get a little pushback. But we have over 12,000 physician members. This means we conduct our own research and are getting the results published, most recently in the European Journal of Clinical Nutrition."

The EJCN article, co-authored by Gonzales, Dr. Barnard, and others, documented the largest-ever study of a plant-based nutrition program in the workplace, to reduce weight and cardiovascular risk. The vegan diet required no portion control and no tiresome counting of carbohydrates. The results were telling: all those who filled out the assessment information lost on average a pound a week; and those with diabetes achieved on average a drop of about half a point in their A1C blood sugar measurement over the course of the study (18 weeks). By comparison, a single diabetes standard medicine can't do that.

The plant-based diet recommended by PCRM is accessible to people from every walk of life. Contrary to a popular misconception, vegan meals can be economical. As Gonzales told us, "We make the diet doable, easy, and affordable. People think it's expensive to be vegan, but everyone knows a vegan meal they already like. It just takes education, a little know-how, and experimenting. That is why I am a dietitian," he concluded. "I want to empower people – not to put them on a diet telling them what they can't do, but what they *can* do."

It sounds like good advice to us. With masses of reliable data at our disposal, all of which point to the benefits of vegetarian and vegan lifestyles (benefiting both human and non-human animals) it makes good sense not to let ourselves be taken in by pro-meat propaganda.

Visit the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine at www.pcrm.org.

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