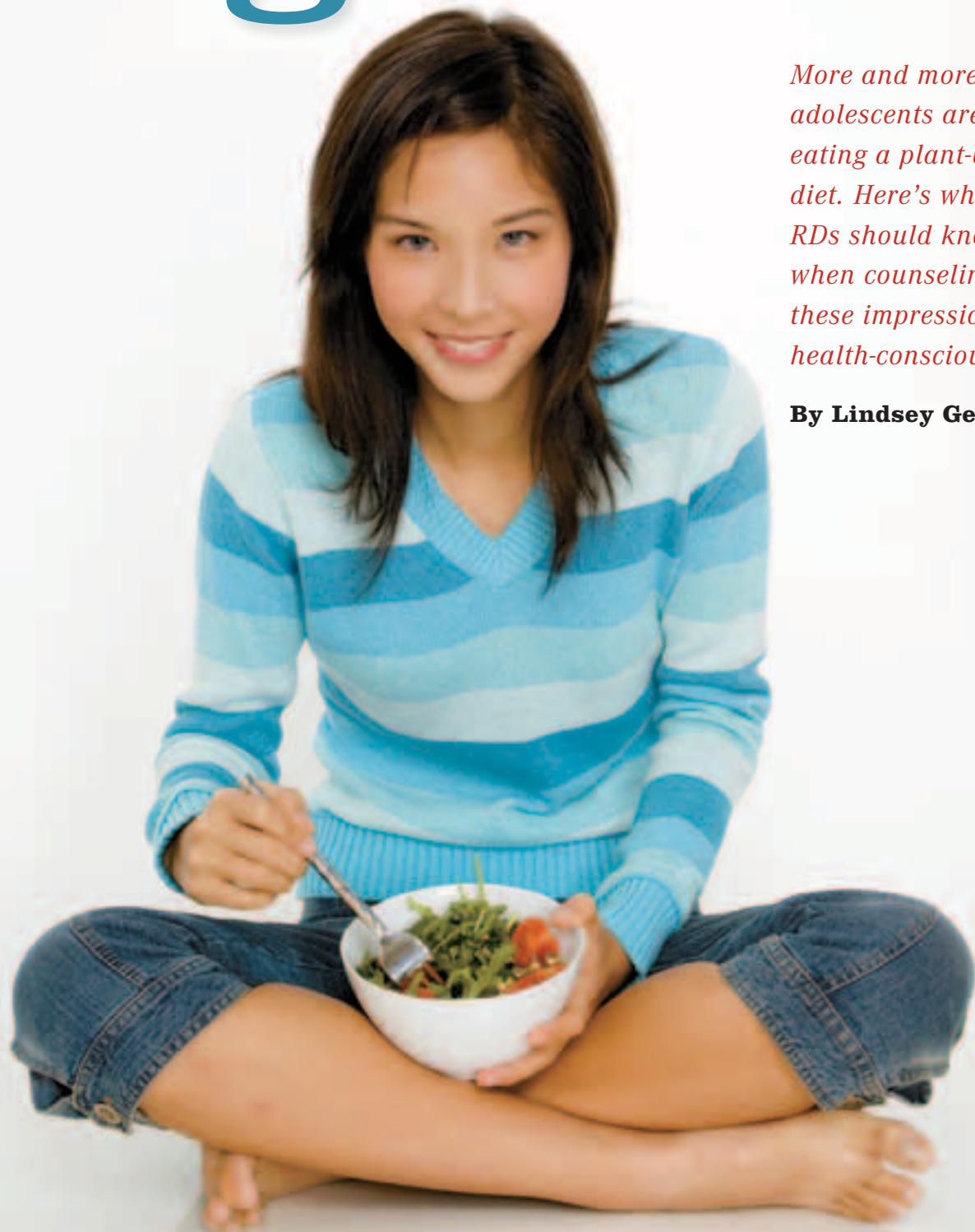


# Vegetarian Teens

Learn How to Better  
Navigate Their  
Healthful Path

*More and more adolescents are eating a plant-based diet. Here's what RDs should know when counseling these impressionable, health-conscious kids.*

**By Lindsey Getz**



**N**icholas Western, a 16-year-old from Fairfax, Virginia, made the switch to a vegetarian diet a little more than two years ago and says he hasn't looked back. As the only vegetarian in his family, he says adapting to this change and finding meat-free food in the house sometimes can be a challenge, but he wants to remain a vegetarian for the long haul.

"As long as I get the necessary nutrients, which I do by taking multivitamins and drinking protein shakes, I believe this diet is sustainable," Western says.

Western is part of a growing trend of teenage vegetarians who seem to be leading the way to a more healthful manner of eating in their age group.

Going vegetarian is nothing new for America's youths, but there does seem to be increasing interest among young people in adopting a plant-based diet. A 2010 poll by the advocacy organization The Vegetarian Resource Group found that 9% of girls aged 13 to 15 claimed to be vegetarian. The reasons youngsters are making this change also have shifted over the years.

"Twenty years ago, a lot of teens turned into vegetarians as a way to assert independence," says Ruth Frechman, MA, RD, a spokesperson for the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics (the Academy) and author of *The Food Is My Friend Diet*. "But these days teens may be more health conscious and look at vegetarian diets as a way to promote a healthful lifestyle."

There's no question that today's teens have more access to information and media outlets than the younger generations of years past, which may be contributing to more of them choosing to forgo meat. For Western, it was an article published by the Sierra Club regarding the carbon footprint of meat that caused him to think about making the switch. He says the books *Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal* and *Chew on This: Everything You Don't Want to Know About Fast Food* influenced his decision as well.

"Today's kids are being raised by parents who are more aware of food connections, sustainability, and the environmental impact of the food choices we make," says Sharon Palmer, RD, author of the upcoming book *The Plant-Powered Diet*, editor of the *Environmental Nutrition* newsletter, and contributing editor for *Today's Dietitian*. "In my generation, those things weren't talked about so much. Today's young people are much more in-tune with the environment, and they realize that vegetarianism is a much more eco-friendly way to eat. They also have more access to information, and on websites like YouTube

there are videos showing how animals are treated, which are difficult to watch, making them even more concerned about the humane treatment of animals."

## Treading Mindfully

While making a switch to a vegetarian diet can be an incredibly healthful decision if done correctly, there's some fear that teens may be missing nutrients vital to their development. With a vegetarian or vegan diet (where individuals also give up animal products, including dairy and eggs), the biggest concern is that teens won't get the calcium, vitamin D, vitamin B<sub>12</sub>, and iron they need. Teens can obtain these nutrients in a vegetarian or vegan diet, but it requires some planning.

"If the teen is no longer drinking cow's milk or eating dairy, they should know there are other ways to get their calcium," says Andrea N. Giancoli, MPH, RD, nutrition policy consultant for the California Center for Public Health Advocacy and a spokesperson for the Academy. "There are a lot of milk substitute products out there that are fortified with calcium as well as vitamin D and B<sub>12</sub>. It used to be difficult to find more fortified products, but things have really changed. There's soy milk, almond milk, rice milk, and even coconut milk, so there's a lot teen vegetarians or vegans can try and find the one that's right for them."

Protein always has been one of the concerns when switching to plant-based foods, but there are plenty of ways to get it without eating meat. "Consider sources like dried beans, peas, lentils, nuts, and seeds," suggests Vandana R. Sheth, RD, CDE, a nutrition educator and spokesperson for the Academy. "These also provide more fiber. However, it's worth noting that too much fiber can sometimes be a negative for a young growing teen since they cause you to fill up fast. Teens just want to make sure they're eating a fully balanced diet and not missing out on certain food groups just because they filled up on too much fiber."

"The emphasis definitely needs to be on balance—no matter what diet you're on," says Monique Richard, a dietetic intern and master of clinical nutrition graduate student at East Tennessee State University who serves as the student editor for *Vegetarian Nutrition Update*, the newsletter of the Academy's Vegetarian Nutrition Dietetic Practice Group. "If you're trying to obtain a balanced diet eating fruits, vegetables, and whole grains—and finding protein other than in animal products—you just need to make sure you're meeting your needs. Teens who are eating French fries and calling themselves vegetarian aren't necessarily meeting the needs for their development."

That's certainly worth addressing as most people automatically equate vegetarianism with eating a diet primarily consisting of vegetables. However, some teens may be eating more pizza and French fries than they are greens—and that's an issue.

"I've met vegetarians who don't like vegetables, and they've chosen to be a vegetarian because of an environmental or animal treatment concern," Palmer says. "Eating vegetables and being a vegetarian should go hand in hand, but that's not always the case. Dietitians may need to help new vegetarians with recipe ideas or other ways to implement meatless dishes into their day to ensure they're not only eating junk food."

### Eating Disorder Concerns

Another concern is that vegetarian teens tend to be more prone to eating disorders. The research on vegetarianism and eating disorders is limited, but a study published in the April 2009 issue of the *Journal of the American Dietetic Association* showed that teens may experiment with vegetarianism as a way to mask an eating disorder since it's a socially acceptable way of saying no to food in public. The study suggests that many of the adolescents who reported switching to a plant-based diet had reasons that were more focused on losing weight than helping the environment, saving animals, or eating healthfully. While the research showed that the vegetarians were healthier—they consumed less than 30% of their calories from fat—it also found that approximately 20% of them were binge eaters compared with only 5% of the omnivores. Similarly, 25% of the vegetarians aged 15 to 18 and 20% of the former vegetarian group studied (same age range) admitted to using extreme weight-loss measures such as forced vomiting or taking laxatives.

Palmer says eating disorders are always a concern whether teens are vegetarians or not. It's an impressionable age and even the actions of celebrities can have an impact on teens' choices. "Just recently, [actress] Megan Fox was quoted saying that she lost so much weight on a vegan diet that she had to go

off of it," Palmer says. "That's the kind of thing that a teenage girl might pick up on and may perhaps decide she's switching to a vegan diet just to lose weight. It's important for parents and dietitians to ensure teens are practicing healthful eating behaviors whether they're vegans, vegetarians, or omnivores."

It's also important to clarify that there's no research linking vegetarian diets to the development of eating disorders. The switch to a plant-based diet doesn't seem to be the cause of unhealthful eating habits among teens. "It's important to separate the conversation of vegetarianism and eating disorders because a vegetarian diet hasn't been found to lead to an eating disorder," Giancoli says. "While it may be used to disguise an existing eating disorder, it isn't the trigger. Clients need to understand this, otherwise it's easy to mistakenly believe an eating disorder is caused by vegetarianism."

The key is to talk to teens about their reasons for choosing a vegetarian diet. "If you meet directly with the teen, work on identifying the true reason for their switch to a vegetarian diet," Sheth says. "Does the teen have a good understanding of the food groups they're going to be eating? I'd also encourage the parents to better understand their child's choice. Is it philosophy? Peer pressure? Their reason for adopting a new diet will have a lot to do with whether they make the switch in a healthful way and whether they actually stick with it. A vegetarian diet can definitely be adequate and nutritionally balanced, so parents don't need to panic."

### Lone Vegetarian

When an adolescent has made the decision to become a vegetarian and the rest of the household hasn't, parents may not know how to handle this dietary change. If the family member who prepares the meals remains an omnivore and there's only one vegetarian in the household, preparing meals suddenly may seem like a difficult task. Giancoli says she can speak from experience. "I was a teen that became a vegetarian, and my family wasn't sure what to do with that," she recalls. "It's definitely a change for everyone, but it doesn't have to be so difficult. I'd encourage parents to be open to their child's decision."

While it may seem like extra work for the cook, Sheth says RDs can arm their clients with tips on how to cook for a teen vegetarian, even if the rest of the household remains omnivore. "My biggest advice for these parents is that they can definitely avoid becoming short-order cooks with just a little bit of planning," Sheth says. "You can make your sauce with meat but save some for the vegetarian of the household before you add it. Or think about making a salad bar with different toppings like chicken and fish but also beans and nuts for the vegetarian. You also can prepare a taco bar with all the fixings, including beans, rice, vegetables, and meat. Your family can customize their plate, but you're not cooking individual meals for everyone."

"Try to introduce it slowly to the whole family, and you may get everyone to adopt more meatless meals," Richard

suggests. "Maybe it's easier for Mom or Dad to start a Meatless Mondays tradition rather than going all vegetarian every day of the week. But once you start introducing some of these dishes, it may not take long to realize that everyone likes them."

The biggest emphasis should be on the resources available to help teen vegetarians stick with their diet. There are several books and websites that can help guide them, Giancoli says. "I'd love to see more clients get counseling as a whole family," she adds. "Mom and Dad might feel like they won't be able to support their child's decision to become a vegetarian, but it's much easier with a registered dietitian walking them through it. An RD can help put these families on the right path."

As for Western, though most of his friends and family are omnivores, he says going vegetarian was the right choice for him, and he plans to stick with it. "My cousin is a vegan and a few of my friends and acquaintances are vegetarian, but I believe the decision whether to eat meat or not is a personal one," he says. "Though it may sometimes be hard to dine out with others when restaurants don't have vegetarian options, many are finally adapting to our needs. Making the switch was hard for about a week, but after the first week or two, it's become more of a reflex."

— Lindsey Getz is a freelance writer based in Royersford, Pennsylvania.

## Resources

Looking for some great websites and books to recommend to vegetarian teens? Here's a list of sources our experts suggest:

- *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Plant-Based Nutrition* by Julieanna Hever, MS, RD, CPT
- *The Dietitian's Guide to Vegetarian Diets: Issues and Applications* by Mark Messina, PhD, and Virginia Messina, MPH, RD
- *Living Vegetarian for Dummies* by Suzanne Havala Hobbs, DrPH, MS, RD
- Mayo Clinic ([www.mayoclinic.com/health/vegetarian-diet/HQ01596](http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/vegetarian-diet/HQ01596))
- MedlinePlus ([www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/vegetariandiet.html](http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/vegetariandiet.html))
- National Agricultural Library Vegetarian Resource List ([www.nal.usda.gov/fnic/pubs/bibs/gen/vegetarian.pdf](http://www.nal.usda.gov/fnic/pubs/bibs/gen/vegetarian.pdf))
- Vegetarian Nutrition Dietetic Practice Group (<http://vegetariannutrition.net>)
- The Vegetarian Resource Group Kids, Teens, and Family Page ([www.vrg.org/family/kidsindex.htm](http://www.vrg.org/family/kidsindex.htm))

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Pour 1 cup scalded milk over shortening, sugar and salt. Add cooked rice. Dissolve yeast in cooled 1/4 cup scalded milk; stir into rice mixture. Work in flours to make a firm dough. Turn out on floured board and knead until smooth and elastic. Place in greased bowl, cover and let rise until doubled. Punch down and knead 2-3 minutes. Shape into loaves and place in well-greased loaf pans. Cover, let rise again until doubled in bulk, then brush tops with melted butter and bake at 375 degrees for 40-45 minutes.

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