

Vegetarianism

Medha

I've been a vegetarian my entire life, and I have often been asked how I cope without meat. It's delicious, they tell me. I retort that I'm saving animals by not eating them. Anyways, the point is that vegetarianism and veganism are quite controversial topics, especially for children. Many other kids I know really want to be vegetarian, but they say that their parents won't let them. You ask them why and they reply 'they said I won't grow and I'll be deficient in nutrients', or something like that. And however much I read about the personal benefits of being a vegetarian, I know that their parents aren't wrong.

You see, meat and fish contain some essential vitamins and nutrients that a child needs to develop healthily. Fish, for example, contains omega-3 fatty acids, which aids in the development of the child's brain. Meats such as chicken and beef contain protein, which is a vital element in the growth of children and for retaining muscle mass.

My mum has long known the deficiencies that me and my sister would face being vegetarian children, and has tried her best to provide us with plenty of foods such as eggs, beans and nuts, which are great sources of protein, along with a few supplements that we (usually) take every night. But even those may not be enough. According to NHS England, evidence suggests that the omega-3 fatty acids in vegetarian substitutes may not have the same heart-disease reducing benefits that occur in oily fish. It's also important that children eat meat at a young age to provide them with plenty of protein.

But otherwise, there are plenty of good vegetarian and vegan substitutes out there for a parent to not to worry too much. Being vegetarian also comes with its own special benefit. We're saving the planet! A terribly large cause of deforestation is for agricultural purposes, to raise pigs and sheep and cattle that are sold as meat for us to eat. And while you could argue that vegetarians would require more of other things to use the farming land for, they really take up two and a half times less space to grow crops than for that of meat purposes, according to the World Wide Fund for nature. That's pretty good! And, it's not all. Vegetarians use much less water than their meat counterparts! No, that's not anything to do with the individual vegetarian. Rather, it's about how our food is produced for us to enjoy. An 8-ounce chicken breast takes over 542 litres of water to produce – that's enough to fill an average bathtub 6.5 times! It takes much less water to produce plant protein, as far as vegetarians are concerned. Not only that, but vegetarians and vegans also form a much smaller carbon footprint than those who eat meat. This is because the less meat-eaters, the less meat that needs to be transported and so the less vehicles needed to transport the food. Being a vegetarian could save you as much as a small family taking 6 months off the road (according to the United Nations Database)! According to the Carbon Footprint calculator, the whole farm-to-plate process for meat contributes to 30% of all global greenhouse gas emissions. They would recommend replacing meat with vegetarian sources of protein, and as I mentioned earlier, these would be things like eggs, beans and nuts, as well as dairy milk (soya or oat milk for vegans), lentils and seeds. And finally, the fish. We all know that unsustainable fishing is a very unfortunate problem we now face, and it's not being helped by the new machinery we are creating to catch fish in the masses. Statistically speaking, a whopping 85% of fisheries are overfished or fully exploited, according to the WWF. It's causing a huge problem to our ecosystems and our seas as a whole. It's also a problem for

humans, as we're running out of the most endangered and wanted fish, such as Atlantic salmon and haddock.

My cousin, a vegetarian-converted-vegan, also tells me how terribly farm animals are treated and how devastating it is to really see what our cows and chickens are being put through. I have read true accounts of cows 'being treated like milk-producing machines', where they are 'genetically manipulated and may be pumped full of antibiotics and hormones in order to produce more milk' and are confined in horrible conditions. Many farms take calves away from their mothers when they are just 1 day old, when the reason cows even produce milk in the first place is to nourish their young. The calves are instead fed milk replacements when humans get the milk meant for them. It's disgusting. The lifespan of cows is also decreased by more than a half by the stressful conditions of working in the factory, and are rendered worthless by the time that they are just 4 or 5 years old when their lifespan is meant to be around 20. These young cows are then sent to be slaughtered, since they've been completely crushed by their labour and the cows have to pay the price. This is much the same with chickens, who face mutilation, confinement, and deprivation of doing the things that make them happy, being the social beings that they are.

And if you're now thinking that being a vegan or a vegetarian means being completely selfless and throwing your fitness away, you're not completely accurate. Research proves multiple health benefits of being a vegetarian: lower low-density lipoprotein cholesterol levels, lower blood pressure and lower rates of hypertension and type 2 diabetes. Vegetarians also tend to have a lower body mass index, lower overall cancer rates and lower risk of chronic disease in comparison to their meat-eating counterparts. Being vegan also provides similar benefits, and in addition it can get rid of the minor allergic reactions to animal products that you may not have known the causes of.

If you're thinking about converting to vegetarianism or veganism, I would recommend not to be too hard on yourself. You should feel like you want to quit meat or animal produce, and not that you are being forced to. Enjoy the journey and find what's best for you. Converting your diet shouldn't feel like giving up something that you love; rather, it should feel like having a taste of something new.

All in all, while being vegetarian comes with its inevitable hardships, they are also relatively simple to overcome, once you understand what you need. And any difficulty in being a vegetarian comes with a lovely present – you're saving the world and everything in it, from cows who suffer to humans under the heat. You know what? I think being a vegetarian is more than worth it. Why don't you try it today?