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Vegetarian Diets: What Are the Advantages?

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Abstract

A growing body of scientific evidence indicates that wholesome vegetarian diets offer distinct advantages compared to diets containing meat and other foods of animal origin. The benefits arise from lower intakes of saturated fat, cholesterol and animal protein as well as higher intakes of complex carbohydrates, dietary fiber, magnesium, folic acid, vitamin C and E, carotenoids and other phytochemicals.

Since vegetarians consume widely divergent diets, a differentiation between various types of vegetarian diets is necessary. Indeed, many contradictions and misunderstandings concerning vegetarianism are due to scientific data from studies without this differentiation.

In the past, vegetarian diets have been described as being deficient in several nutrients including protein, iron, zinc, calcium, vitamin B₁₂ and A, n-3 fatty acids and iodine. Numerous studies have demonstrated that the observed deficiencies are usually due to poor meal planning. Well-balanced vegetarian diets are appropriate for all stages of the life cycle, including children, adolescents, pregnant and lactating women, the elderly and competitive athletes. In most cases, vegetarian diets are beneficial in the prevention and treatment of certain diseases, such as cardiovascular disease, hypertension, diabetes, cancer, osteoporosis, renal disease and dementia, as well as diverticular disease, gallstones and rheumatoid arthritis.

The reasons for choosing a vegetarian diet often go beyond health and well-being and include among others economical, ecological and social concerns. The influences of these aspects of vegetarian diets are the subject of the new field of nutritional ecology that is concerned with sustainable life styles and human development.

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Introductory Remarks

In the past, the key questions about vegetarian diets were about risks and dangers, that is, about its disadvantages rather than its advantages. Today,