Dear Alice,

I am a first-year graduate student planning to become a vegetarian for ethical reasons. Since I've eaten and cooked meat for many years, I'm not exactly sure what a good vegetarian diet includes. I don't want to do anything unhealthy, of course. Is there someone at Columbia Health with whom students can arrange to talk and plan a vegetarian diet?

Thanks!

Future Veggie

Answer

Dear Future Veggie,

Yes, absolutely! Columbia Health has lots of resources for you as you prepare to make the switch. When planning out a healthy vegetarian diet, it is certainly helpful to have some guidance. The get balanced! Guide for Healthier Eating provides a ton of great information on making healthy food choices as a vegetarian or vegan. Columbia students can also meet with a registered dietitian through Columbia Health. Before meeting with a professional, it may be helpful to do some background research. Check out the related questions below for a plethora of useful information!

It's a great idea to plan consciously when switching over to a vegetarian diet. Not eating meat can offer many health benefits, as well as addressing environmental and ethical concerns. However, people who make the change without learning about proper nutrition can very easily become deficient in certain nutrients, experience undesired weight gain or loss, and fall into the famous trap of becoming a "pasta" vegetarian who lives on carbs and sweets and not much else.

Have you thought about to what degree of vegetarianism you will pledge? There are many variations on the vegetarian diet, including: lacto-ovo, vegetarians who avoid all meat but eat milk and eggs; pescatarians, who eat fish, and do not eat other types of meat; vegans, who avoid all animal products including milk, eggs, and even honey (produced by bees); raw foodists, who eat only raw fruits, veggies, sprouted nuts and grains; and even fruititarians, who only eat fruits, nuts, and seeds. Wherever you fall on the vegetarian spectrum, here are some general tips on converting to a vegetarian diet:
Plan to incorporate into your diet a wide variety of whole grains, fruits, vegetables, legumes, nuts, seeds, vegetable oils, and of course leave room for some decadent delights (think: vegan triple chocolate cake).

Ensure that you are eating adequate amounts of non-meat proteins [4], necessary for long-term sustained energy, and to repair and replace worn-out body cells. High protein veggie foods include beans, nuts (including peanuts and almonds), and milk.

Vitamins B₁₂ [5] and D, calcium, iron, and zinc are other nutrients important to pay attention to, as they are abundantly found in meat, but not as easy to find in plant foods. Some strategizing with a nutritionist or educating yourself about vegetarian sources for these nutrients will help you make sure you’re getting enough of these important nutrients.

Because vegetarian diets are often high in fiber, remember to drink lots of water to ensure all that roughage is moving through and out of your system efficiently. Six to eight glasses per day is the general recommendation.

When planning a vegetarian diet, it is important to take into consideration a number of variables, such as body size, activity level, health status, and food preferences. But standing behind your ethical beliefs with the food you take in and the industries you support is an admirable and worthwhile undertaking. With the right guidance, education, and support, you could enjoy great health, a happy and clean conscience, and the joy of being an inspiration and teacher for others who wish to join you!

Alice!

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