Dear Alice,

I have been a lacto-ovo vegetarian for three years now. I want to stop and get back to eating meat. I do not know the proper way of doing this, so I would love feedback on how to plan my meals.

Thank you,

J

Answer

Dear J,

Rejoining the ranks of the omnivorous need not mean you make major shifts in your current vegetarian diet, assuming that your current diet is reasonably well-balanced and contains plenty of fruits, vegetables, and whole grains. Most recommendations about transitioning from a vegetarian diet to one that includes meat suggest slowly adding in easy-to-digest, lean meats, while continuing to eat vegetarian staples.

Fish is an excellent first step. Fish, especially salmon, trout, herring, and sardines (in general, cold-water fish with small bones) is a great source of protein as well as omega-3 fatty acids, and fish isn't as hard for the body to break down and digest as more dense, fattier meats. Choosing the right fish has become trickier as concerns about mercury levels (a toxin), overfishing of wild stocks, and aqua-farming practices increase. Check out the Monterey Bay Aquarium's Seafood Watch program to learn more about sustainable and healthy choices for getting your fish fix.

Lean meats, such as poultry (white meat and skinless are the leanest poultry choices), lean cuts of beef and pork, and ground meats with the least percentage of fat, are also good sources of protein and iron. These should be at least 90 percent lean. Again, when adding poultry and meats back into your diet, you may want to consider issues of sustainability when buying. Some issues to consider include whether the animals were free-range, raised without hormones or antibiotics, or grass-fed.

Like any meat-eater, you may want to use caution when considering processed meats like ham, sausage, hot dogs, and packaged lunch meats, as they're often loaded with preservatives and sodium. However, if you find a trustworthy brand or deli, these are a convenient and easy way to incorporate meat into your diet once your body has had a while to
get used to the leaner meats. Turkey, roast beef, and low-fat varieties of luncheon meats tend to have less fat than bologna or salami. With the addition of meat to your diet comes increased cholesterol and saturated fat. Fatty or red meats, egg yolks, and full-fat dairy are high in both cholesterol and saturated fat. Everyone, not just those transitioning from vegetarianism, should be mindful of how much cholesterol and saturated fat they're consuming.

Finally, just because you are adding meat to your diet, remember that your vegetarian favorites like grains, beans, nuts, seeds, fruits, and vegetables are still an important part of your eating plan. These are all important sources of vitamins, minerals, fibers, proteins, and enzymes. You mentioned that you were a lacto-ovo vegetarian, which means you have been eating eggs and dairy. These animal products are great sources of protein and other nutrients and can be included in your diet along with everything else.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) considers fish, meat, legumes, and beans to be in the same food group. The recommended daily amount one should eat from this group depends on age, sex, and level of physical activity; however, typically a serving from the protein group is 3 to 4 ounces. As you can see, meat doesn't need to be eaten in huge portions to meet your protein requirements and, you don't need to eat it every day. Making the change to an omnivorous diet slowly, with continued use of the vegetarian foods you were accustomed to eating, can help avoid shocking your system with a sudden onslaught of new foods.

To talk to more specifically about your unique dietary needs, you might consider making an appointment with a Registered Dietitian. Enjoy the vast array of new options you have in meal planning and restaurant choices, and don't forget to eat your vegetables, even in the midst of meat-eating bliss!

Alice!

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