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 on campus with whom students can arrange to talk and plan a vegetarian diet?

Thanks!

Future Veggie

Answer

Dear Future Veggie,

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 a pattern of eating that doesn't provide the types of necessary nutrients even though it's sans animal products. The good news is that you don't have to go it alone when informing this new eating pattern; it's certainly helpful to have some professional guidance. Read on for more about converting to a vegetarian diet and who can help you along the way.

First, it's wise to think about what degree of vegetarianism you will pledge. There are many variations on the vegetarian diet, including:

- People who will include eggs (ovo-vegetarians) or dairy products, such as milk, yogurt, and cheese (lacto-vegetarians) in their meatless diet
- Those who choose to eat eggs and dairy products, but not meat (lacto-ovo vegetarians)
- Folks who will choose to eat fish (pescetarians) or include poultry (pollotarians), but not other types of animal meats
- Persons who eschew all animal products and by-products in their diet, including dairy, eggs, and even honey (vegans)

Since you have decided on a new way of eating due to ethical reasons, those may play into what specific types of animal products you will or will not decide to consume. Wherever you end up on the spectrum though, there are a few more 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 treats here and there (think: vegan triple chocolate cake).
- Ensure that you are eating adequate amounts of non-meat proteins, necessary for long-term sustained energy, and to repair and replace worn-out body cells. High protein veggie foods include beans, nuts, and seeds, soy products such as tofu or tempeh, and dairy items.
- Vitamins B12, calcium, iron, zinc, omega-3 fatty acids, and iodine are other nutrients to be on the lookout for, as they are abundantly found in meat, but not as easy to find in plant foods.
- Because vegetarian diets are often high in fiber, remember to drink plenty of water to ensure all that roughage is moving through and out of your system efficiently.

Even though you know a bit more about what to look out for in your new veggie diet, you don?t have to pick a date and start your new eating pattern immediately. To ease into it gradually, you may decide to incorporate more and more meatless meals into your repertoire over time (folks who adopt this way of eating over the long-term, don?t go completely vegetarian, and are sometimes called flexitarians or semivegetarians). Consider perusing the internet and your friend?s cookbook collections for recipe ideas. You can also take some of your current favorite dishes and make meatless substitutions to keep them in your meal rotation moving forward. As you continue to plan for this dietary change, it?s also wise to take into consideration a number of variables, such as body size, activity level, health status, and food preferences. Meeting with a registered dietitian or a health care provider at your campus? health services may help you get started when you?re ready and assist you in developing a healthy vegetarian eating plan with these factors in mind.

All this to say, putting your ethical beliefs into practice by being mindful about the food you take in and the industries you support is an admirable and worthwhile undertaking. With appropriate guidance, education, and support, you can enjoy a nutritious diet, 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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