Dear Alice,

What is the best way to begin a vegan lifestyle change? Do you have any suggestions for breakfast that are both meatless and low carbohydrate?

Answer

Dear Reader,

Veganism: easy as 123 and ABC? Let’s discuss. Before we start though, it will be helpful to determine what kind of “vegan lifestyle” you want to lead. The Vegan Outreach group [2] and The American Vegan Society [3] define vegan practice as not eating, buying, or using animal products (including honey and silk) or products tested on animals. Vegan groups give some attention to the health benefits of vegan style eating, but their main focus is on maintaining a lifestyle that minimizes the mistreatment of animals. By exploring your feelings about ethical issues related to consuming animal products and food, you will find your niche in the wide range of interpretations of what a vegan lifestyle entails.

Though some people may be able to completely overhaul their lifestyle all at once, it may be easier to make the change to veganism by breaking it down into three steps:

1. Start with a small objective, such as cutting one thing out of your eating plan, like red meat, for example. Explore the nearest health food store and start sampling alternative non-meat protein [4] sources. A registered dietitian may be able to offer extra guidance.

2. When you are comfortable with this small change, try cutting more if not all animal products from your diet. Sample vegan egg replacements, soy cheeses, and soy, rice, or almond milks. Also consider phasing out other products you use that contain animal byproducts (i.e., gelatin, leather, or soaps made with animal fat). Now would also be a great time to start researching and experimenting with one new vegan dish each week and checking out recipe sources such as Vegetarian Times [5] or the vegan cookbook section at your local library. One low-carb breakfast recipe you may want to consider is a veggie omelet. Use vegan egg substitute, red or green peppers, soy cheese, salt and pepper to taste, and one slice of whole-wheat toast on the side. Throw in an 8 ounce low-fat soy latte and you have yourself a high-protein, relatively low-carb breakfast!

3. Once you’ve experimented with some recipes and are more familiar with new ingredients and household items, take the final step of cutting out all animal products from your diet and everyday usage. By doing your research and taking time to reach the
 ultimate goal of a vegan lifestyle, you will have eased into new approaches to shopping not only for food but other products as well.

Whether you have a strict or liberal definition of a vegan lifestyle, it is a given that you will cut animal products from your eating plan, but it is crucial to keep up on the ABCs of nutrition as well. Most of your replacement protein sources and vegan staples such as grains, fruits, and vegetables will contain carbohydrates, so a low carbohydrate/vegan meal will be hard to achieve, though not impossible. Without paying careful attention to the nutrients you are consuming, you may be at risk for not meeting your nutrient needs. If you’re just looking to minimize carbs on the whole, cutting down on junk food (i.e., chips, crackers, sugary cereals, breakfast bars, and cookies) is the ideal way to do this.

As for maintaining appropriate protein levels in your vegan diet, experts at the Institute of Medicine recommend that 15 to 20 percent of daily calories come from protein. This amounts to about 65 grams of protein per day for men and approximately 55 grams for women. Although you will be cutting out commonly recognized protein sources—meat, fish, poultry, and dairy—from your eating plan, have no worries. Plant foods such as soy, legumes, nuts, and seeds also contain a good amount of protein. Check out the Vegetarianism section in the Go Ask Alice! archives for more information on specific foods that will help you meatlessly "beef up" your pantry and fridge.

By cutting animal products out of your eating plan, you will also cut out the most common sources of a number of high priority nutrients like vitamin B₁₂, vitamin D, calcium, and omega-3 fatty acids. For tips to help you make sure you're consuming enough of them in your vegan diet, check out the Related Q&As. Being conscious to include fortified soy products, cereals, and non-dairy milk, plus a variety of dark green veggies, legumes, seed, nuts, and beans in your diet is imperative in ensuring you're getting the nutrients your body needs. Many of these foods will also provide good sources of iron, riboflavin, and zinc which are also harder to come by in a vegan diet.

When making changes to your lifestyle and eating habits such as those dictated by veganism, it is best to have a clear understanding of the challenges that lie ahead. The concern you show for doing so in a healthy way is great. Keep it up and remember, although it may not be as easy as 1-2-3, by staying on top of your nutrition ABCs you can successfully convert to a vegan lifestyle healthfully!

Alice!
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