

Vegan Children: Healthy and Happy

Wednesday, 06 February 2008

From PETA.com

Children raised as vegans—who consume no animal products, including meat, eggs, and dairy products—can derive all the nutrients essential for optimum health from plant-based sources.

Hot Wings, Heart Disease, and Sick Stomachs

Unprecedented rates of children raised on the “traditional” American diet of cholesterol and saturated fat-laden chicken nuggets, hot dogs, and pepperoni pizza show symptoms of heart disease, the number one killer of adults. A study in *The New England Journal of Medicine* found that at least 60 percent of children and young adults have early atherosclerotic (hardened artery) damage.(1) It’s no wonder considering that hot dogs, sausage, and bacon are on the daily menu for a stunning 25 percent of kids between the ages of 19 months and 2 years.(2)

The number of obese preschool-aged children and 12-to-19-year-old adolescents has more than doubled since the 1970s and more than tripled for 6-to-11-year-olds.(3) Pediatricians are reporting an alarming increase in the number of children diagnosed with type 2 diabetes, a disease that typically affects adults, and 85 percent of those cases involve overweight kids.(4)

According to acclaimed pediatrician Dr. Benjamin Spock in his book *Dr. Spock’s Baby and Child Care*, “Children who grow up getting their nutrition from plant foods rather than meats … are less likely to develop weight problems, diabetes, high blood pressure, and some forms of cancer.”(5)

Food-related illnesses affect more than 76 million people annually and kill more than 5,000.(6) Farmed animals are fed 20 million pounds of antibiotics each year, which are designed to promote growth and prevent them from getting sick but which are retained in the flesh that people eat. Scientists believe that such involuntary consumption of these drugs by meat-eaters is giving rise to strains of bacteria that antibiotics are ineffective against when consumers become ill.(7)

Salmonella poisoning alone affects at least 40,000 people each year (the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention suspects that unreported cases may increase that number 30 times), yet only one in 16 million chickens is tested for it.(8,9) A Consumer Reports study of 525 supermarket chickens found campylobacter (which causes illness in more than 1 million people every year) in 81 percent of them and salmonella in 15 percent, with up to 84 percent of the bacteria resistant to antibiotics.(10,11) Eggs pose a salmonella threat to approximately one out of every 50 people each year in affected areas of the U.S.(12) *E. coli* is a type of bacteria that can be deadly to children and sickens more than 73,000 people each year, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture reports that half the cattle slaughtered for food in the U.S. are likely infected with it.(13,14)

Fish flesh also presents health problems. Polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), residual industrial compounds that can still be found in the environment, have caused cancer in animals and skin problems and liver damage in humans.(15) Fish flesh has been found to harbor levels of PCBs thousands of times higher than those in the water that they live in.(16) Fish also accumulate methylmercury in their bodies, and pregnant women and children have been cautioned by the Environmental Protection Agency not to eat fish flesh that may contain high levels of this toxic substance.(17)

Dangers of Dairy Products

According to Dr. Frank Oski, the former director of pediatrics at Johns Hopkins University, “There is no reason to drink cow’s milk at any time in your life. It was designed for calves, it was not designed for humans, and we should all stop drinking it today, this afternoon.”(18) Dr. Spock agreed, saying, “[T]here was a time when cow’s milk was considered very desirable. But research, along with clinical experience, has forced doctors and nutritionists to rethink this recommendation.”(19)

Cow’s milk is the number one cause of food allergies in infants and children, according to the American Gastroenterological Association.(20) Millions of Americans are lactose-intolerant, and an estimated 80 percent of African-Americans and up to 100 percent of Native Americans and Asian-Americans suffer from the condition, which can include symptoms such as bloating, gas, cramps, vomiting, headaches, rashes, or asthma.(21) As early as 2 years of age, most people begin to produce less lactase, the enzyme that helps with the digestion of milk. This reduction can lead to lactose intolerance.(22) Breast-feeding mothers should also shun cow’s milk from their diets, as the proteins can be transferred to infants and upset babies’ intestines.(23)

Milk is suspected of triggering juvenile diabetes, a disease that causes blindness and other serious effects.(24) Some children’s bodies treat cow’s milk protein as a foreign substance and produce high levels of antibodies to fend off this “invader.” These antibodies also destroy the cells that produce insulin in the pancreas, leading to diabetes. Studies have also found that autism and schizophrenia in children may be linked to the body’s inability to digest the milk protein casein; symptoms of these diseases diminished or disappeared in 80 percent of the children who were switched to milk-free diets.(25)

Other common childhood ailments such as chronic ear infections, asthma, and skin conditions can also be eliminated if cow's milk is avoided.(26)

Nutrition in Vegan Diets

Nutritionists and physicians have learned that plant products are good sources of protein, iron, calcium, and vitamin D because they can be easily absorbed by the body and don't contain artery-clogging fat. The American Dietetic Association states, "Well-planned vegan diets are appropriate for all stages of the life cycle, including during pregnancy, lactation, infancy, childhood, and adolescence."(27)

- **Protein:** In the U.S., consumption of too much protein is a much bigger issue than not getting enough. Protein deficiency is common only in countries suffering from famine. Eating too much protein, however, can lead to cancer of the colon and the liver.(28,29) Children can get all the protein that their bodies need from whole grains in the form of oats, brown rice, and pasta; nuts and seeds, including sunflower seeds, almonds, walnuts, and spreads such as tahini and peanut butter; and legumes, including tofu, lentils, and beans.

- **Iron:** Some babies' intestines bleed after drinking cow's milk, increasing their risk of developing iron-deficiency anemia, since the blood that they're losing contains iron.(30) Formula-fed babies should be fed a soy-based formula with added iron to minimize the risk of intestinal bleeding. Iron-rich foods such as raisins, almonds, dried apricots, blackstrap molasses, and fortified grain cereals will meet the needs of toddlers and children 12 months and older. Vitamin C helps the body absorb iron, so foods rich in both—such as green, leafy vegetables—are particularly valuable.(31)

- **Calcium:** Cornbread, broccoli, kale, tofu, dried figs, tahini, great northern beans, and fortified orange juice and soy milk are all excellent sources of calcium. As with iron, vitamin C will help your child's system absorb calcium efficiently.

- **Vitamin D:** Cow's milk does not naturally contain vitamin D; it's added later. Vitamin D-enriched soy milk provides this nutrient without the animal fat. A child who spends as little as 10 to 15 minutes three times a week playing in the sunshine, with arms and face exposed, will get sufficient vitamin D because it is synthesized in the skin when the skin is exposed to sunlight.(32)

- **Vitamin B12:** Whereas other primates get their necessary vitamin B12 from dirt, unchlorinated water, feces, and insects, commercially available multivitamins will ensure an adequate amount of the vitamin for your child.(33) Vitamin B12 is also found in fortified soy milk and many cereals.

What You Can Do

A healthy vegan diet is easy to plan and maintain. Products fortified with calcium, vitamin D, and vitamin B12 are available in most grocery stores. Mock meats are especially delicious and are also readily available in most grocery stores and many restaurants. For tips on tempting your kids with delicious vegetarian dishes, visit VegCooking.com and check out the following additional resources.

Related Books

- The Compassionate Cook by PETA and Ingrid Newkirk (Warner, 1993)
- Dr. Spock's Baby and Child Care by Benjamin Spock and Steven J. Parker (Pocket Books, 1998)
- Pregnancy, Children, and the Vegan Diet by Michael Klaper, M.D. (Gentle World, Inc., 1994)
- Raising Vegetarian Children: A Guide to Good Health and Family Harmony by Joanne Stepaniak and Vesanto Melina (McGraw-Hill, 2002)
- Vegetarian Baby by Sharon Yntema (McBooks Press, 1984)
- Vegetarian Children by Sharon Yntema (McBooks Press, 1987)
- The Vegetarian Mother and Baby Book by Rose Elliot (Pantheon Books, 1986)

Related Web Sites

- www.lalecheleague.org (La Leche League, 1-800-LA-LECHE)
- www.pcrm.org (Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine, 202-686-2210)
- www.vegetariantimes.com (Vegetarian Times magazine, 804-346-1223 to send a question via fax)
- www.vrg.org/journal (Vegetarian Journal, 410-366-8343)

Resources

- 1) Janice M. Horowitz, "Personal Time: Your Health," Time 15 Jun. 1998.
- 2) T.A. Badger, "Infants, Toddlers Developing Bad Eating Habits, Study Finds," Associated Press, 26 Oct. 2003.
- 3) Institute of Medicine of the National Academies, "Overview of the IOM's Childhood Obesity Prevention Study," Sep. 2004.
- 4) "Pediatric Obesity: Obese Children Increasingly Diagnosed With Life-Shortening Problems," NewsRx.net, 3 May 2003.
- 5) Benjamin Spock and Steven J. Parker, Dr. Spock's Baby and Child Care (New York: Pocket Books, 1998) 333.
- 6) Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Foodborne Illness," 10 Jan. 2005.
- 7) Jeff Donn, "Contaminated Meat Spurs Concern. Study Finds 1 in 5 Market Samples Contained Drug-Resistant Bacteria," Associated Press, 18 Oct. 2001.

- 8) Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Division of Bacterial and Mycotic Diseases, “Salmonellosis,” 31 Oct. 2006.
- 9) Marian Burros, “Eating Well; A Vulnerable Food Supply, A Call for More Safety,” The New York Times 31 Oct. 2001.
- 10) Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Division of Bacterial and Mycotic Diseases, “Campylobacter Infections,” 6 Oct. 2005.
- 11) “Dirty Birds. Even 'Premiim' Chickens Harbor Dangerous Bacteria,”Consumer Reports Jan. 2007.
- 12) Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Division of Bacterial and Mycotic Diseases, “Salmonella Enteritidis,” 13 Oct. 2005.
- 13) Philip Brasher, “Weekly Farm: Meat Industry Eyes Government Technology to Make Meat Safer,” Associated Press, 26 Oct. 2001.
- 14) Meat Trade Institute, “Deadly E. Coli Bug May Affect Half of Cattle,” Meat Industry Internet News Service, 15 Nov. 1999.
- 15) Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, “ToxFAQs for Polychlorinated Biphenyls (PCBs),” 16 Sep. 2003.
- 16) Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry.
- 17) U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and Environmental Protection Agency, “What You Need to Know About Mercury in Fish and Shellfish,” Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition, Mar. 2004.
- 18) “Dr. Spock Joins Milk’s Detractors; Nutritional Value, Safety Are Questioned,” The Washington Post 30 Sep. 1992.
- 19) Spock and Parker 331.
- 20) American Gastroenterological Association, “American Gastroenterological Association Medical Position Statement: Guidelines for the Evaluation of Food Allergies,” Gastroenterology 120 (2001): 1023-5.
- 21) National Digestive Diseases Information Clearinghouse, “Lactose Intolerance,” National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases, Mar. 2006.
- 22) National Digestive Diseases Information Clearinghouse.
- 23) Spock and Parker 113.
- 24) “Study Explores Link Between Cow’s Milk, Juvenile Diabetes,” Kitchener-Waterloo Record 20 Sep. 2002.
- 25) “Milk Protein May Play Role in Mental Disorders,” Reuters Health, 1 Apr. 1999.
- 26) Spock and Parker 332.
- 27) American Dietetic Association, “Position of the American Dietetic Association and Dieticians of Canada: Vegetarian Diets,” Journal of the American Dietetic Association Jun. 2003.
- 28) Gary C. Curhan et al., “A Prospective Study of Dietary Calcium and Other Nutrients and the Risk of Symptomatic Kidney Stones,” New England Journal of Medicine 328 (1993): 833-8.
- 29) Kathleen M. Stadler, “The Diet and Cancer Connection,” Virginia Tech, Nov. 1997.
- 30) University of Michigan Health System, “Cow’s Milk: Pros and Cons,” McKesson Health Solutions LLC, 2006.
- 31) U.S. National Library of Medicine and National Institutes of Health, “Medical Encyclopedia: Vitamin C,” MedlinePlus Health Information, 27 Oct. 2004.
- 32) U.S. National Library of Medicine and National Institutes of Health, “Medical Encyclopedia: Vitamin D,” MedlinePlus Health Information, 27 Oct. 2004.
- 33) Stephen Walsh, Ph.D., “B12: An Essential Part of a Healthy Plant-Based Diet,” Food for All Our Futures, 35th World Vegetarian Congress, Heriot-Watt University, Edinburgh, Scotland, 8-14 Jul. 2002.