Vegetarianism

By ACSH Staff — July 1, 1997
Executive Summary

Survey results indicate that 2 to 7 percent of Americans regard themselves as vegetarians, but less than 1 percent completely exclude meat, poultry, fish, and shellfish from their diets. Even fewer Americans choose vegan diets that exclude all foods of animal origin.

Some scientific studies indicate that vegetarians have lower risks of chronic diseases than do meat eaters. However, some of the apparent benefits of vegetarianism may be attributable to aspects of the vegetarian diet other than the absence of meat.

Vegetarian diets that include dairy products are usually nutritionally adequate, as long as care is taken to include good sources of bioavailable iron and zinc in the diet.

Diets completely devoid of animal products (vegan diets) may not be nutritionally adequate unless they are very carefully planned. Vegans should take supplements of vitamin B12 or eat soy products or cereals fortified with vitamin B12. They may also need supplements of vitamin D, iron, zinc, and calcium.

Properly planned lacto- and lacto-ovo-vegetarian diets can conform to official dietary recommendations, including the Dietary Guidelines for Americans, the Food Guide Pyramid, and the Recommended Dietary Allowances.

People with increased nutritional needs, such as infants, children, adolescents, pregnant or lactating women, and individuals with certain medical problems, may have difficulty meeting their nutritional needs on vegan diets. People who plan to follow such limited diets during times of increased nutritional needs should seek nutritional counseling from an informed physician or registered dietitian. Parents who follow unusual diets or lifestyles should realize that children are far more vulnerable than adults are to serious health damage from nutritional inadequacies and imbalances. Dietary restrictions that may be well tolerated by adults could cause lasting harm to an infant or young child.

Health professionals, parents, and others who deal with young people should be aware that some teenage and college-age women who describe themselves as vegetarians may actually be practicing unhealthful forms of weight control or suffering from an eating disorder. These young women are at risk for serious health problems.

Young people who become vegetarians for ethical or environmental reasons may also be placing their health at risk. Often, these young vegetarians lack the knowledge and motivation needed to plan healthful vegetarian meals.