

Vegging Out



Ever thought of being a vegetarian? These teens tell what it's like.

By Tracey Middlekauff

“I went vegetarian when I was 10 simply because I didn’t want animals to be killed for my food,” says Erin S., now 17 and a 12th grader in Collegeville, Pa. Then, when she was 13, Erin decided to take it a step further and become vegan. While vegetarians don’t eat meat, vegans avoid *all* products that come from animals. That means no meat, eggs, or dairy, which includes milk, cheese, and butter. And Erin

isn’t alone: At least 367,000 kids in the U.S. have adopted a meat-free diet, according to one survey. So why are so many kids making that choice?

Many, if not most, are motivated by a concern for animals. “When people ask me why I am a vegetarian,” Kaya W., a 10th grader in Richmond, Va., explains, “I talk about how it was once necessary to kill for food, but nowadays it’s completely

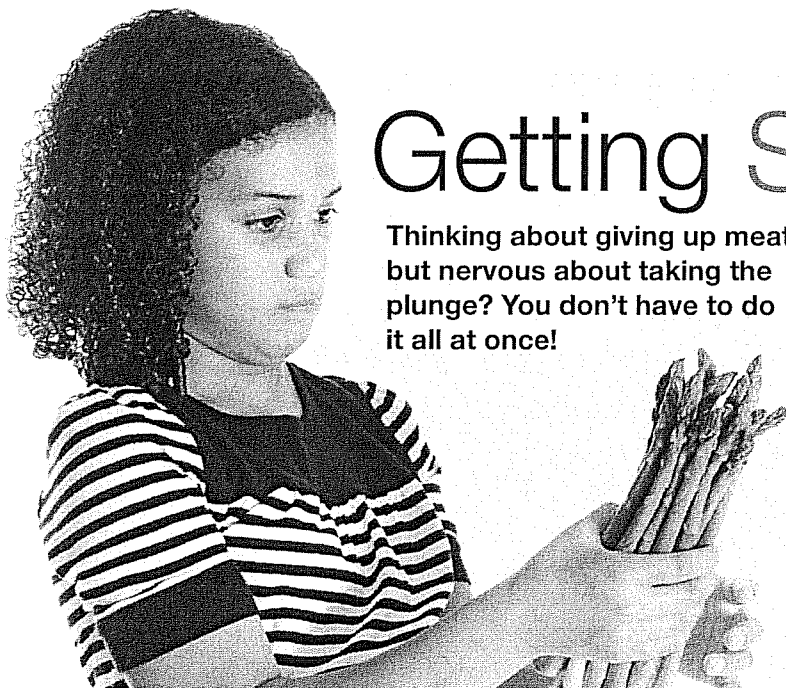


possible, and even easy, to follow a healthy, meat-free diet.”

Ninth grader Nolan T. of Northampton, Mass., gave up meat in fifth grade. At first, he did it because he felt bad about eating animals. But now, Nolan says, “I’ve read books and seen movies [such as *Food, Inc.*] about the environmental impact the meat industry has on our country, and these things have further motivated me.”

Can I be healthy while not eating meat?

Yes! “It is possible for children to remain healthy as vegetarians, but it takes work and some planning,” says Dr. Joanna Dolgoff, a pediatrician and obesity specialist in New York. So if you’re thinking of giving up meat, you’re going to have to make sure you find adequate sources of protein, iron, calcium, and vitamin B12.



Getting Started

Thinking about giving up meat but nervous about taking the plunge? You don't have to do it all at once!

Try it for a week. Sign up with your family for the Veggie Challenge through the Toronto Vegetarian Association (www.veg.ca), and you'll get free recipes and tips for seven days.

If you're still curious but a week seems like a long time, why not try eating meat free for a day? Be sure to find protein substitutes such as beans, tofu, and veggie burgers. Check out www.meatlessmonday.com.

ISTOCK

That is especially important if you want to be a vegan. Your body needs all those nutrients to keep your muscles, nerves, skin, and blood healthy.

Good meat-free sources of protein include beans, tofu, nuts, seeds, whole grains, and veggie burgers made from soy. You can get B12 from dairy and eggs, but if you're a vegan, you'll need to find foods with that vitamin added. Bottom line? It's best to talk to a dietitian or health professional who can get you on the right track.

"You have to get creative," says ninth-grade vegetarian Amanda S. of Murrysville, Pa. "I have a protein shake every day after school."

There are other foods to include as well. "Eat plenty of green leafy vegetables and other iron-rich foods," Erin says. Don't forget about calcium. "Non-dairy milks and yogurts, as well as broccoli and other veggies, can take care of that," she says.

How do I tell my family?

At first, you may encounter some resistance from your family, particularly around dinnertime. But it helps if you do a little research ahead of time. "If you can't tell your parents where you're going to get

your protein, you may have trouble convincing them," says David Alexander, executive director of the Toronto Vegetarian Association. "Be able to tell your parents specifically what kinds of food you'd like them to get at the grocery store. Think of meat alternatives the whole family can enjoy."

Emily S., an 11th grader from Ithaca, N.Y., became a vegetarian in sixth grade. "It was difficult when I began because my parents weren't taking it seriously," she says. "But as they realized it wasn't a phase, they started catering towards me [at meals] a little more."

Will my friends freak out?

There's a good chance your friends will support your choice—they might even think it's cool. But it's possible that not everyone will understand. "Some of them have been very weird," Katie W., a 13-year-old from High Point, N.C., says about her friends. "They like to put meat in my face a lot."

Katy S., an 11th grader in Nebraska's cattle country, has heard plenty from people who are upset with her decision. She went out to eat with a friend whose

brother worked in the meat industry. "He was actually angry when I filled up my plate with meat-free options at a buffet," she says. "People are always going to rally against anything they find unusual."

Her advice on how to explain your choice to people who don't understand? Feel confident in your decision, and be firm about it. "Know your reasoning," Katy says. As long as you're straightforward, she says, "people tend to just leave it at that."

If it's so tough, why bother?

Convincing your family, dealing with rude people, making sure you get adequate nutrition—being a vegetarian or vegan can be tough in a world made up mostly of meat eaters. But for those who feel strongly about their choice, it's worth it.

Katy feels much better since she gave up meat. After just two weeks of being vegetarian, she says, "I had more energy, I was happy, and I didn't miss meat one bit."

Other young people feel they are helping the planet by being meat free. Some like knowing that their food caused no harm to animals. Others are happy they aren't part of the meat-farming process that in some cases may hurt air, water, or land. Amanda loves being a vegetarian for those reasons. "I am doing something to help the environment," she says.

Nolan agrees. "My favorite thing about being vegetarian is probably the way that I can do something good for the world on a daily basis just by not eating meat," he says. **CH1**

TRY IT

Pretend that you are going to go vegetarian for a week. Plan your meals and snacks. Make sure you get enough nutrients.

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MEAT-FREE LUNCH: Beyond Bagels

Often, the only vegetarian options in the school cafeteria are starchy, unhealthy choices such as French fries, bagels, or pizza. Fourteen-year-old Wyntergrace Williams noticed that problem in her Greenwich, Conn., school when she gave up meat a few years ago. So she started a drive to get more healthy vegetarian options at lunch.

"Having access to healthier, plant-based lunches cuts down on childhood obesity," Wyntergrace says. "It can also help you concentrate better in school." She spoke to her school's student government and met with the principal about the issue. She got other students involved. They all signed a petition asking the school to add more healthful vegetarian foods to the menu. It worked!



Think vegetarians eat just salads and carrot sticks? Think again! Here's what some meat-free teens love to eat.

Katie W.: "Veggie Delite at Subway and vegetable lasagna."

Josh D.: "I've discovered *falafel*." [fried patties or balls made of chickpeas, vegetables, and spices, often served in a sandwich]

Kevin K.: "My favorite meal is carrot cashew quiche. It's delicious!"

Amanda S.: "Mac and cheese with vegetarian beef crumbles."



For inspiration and ideas, check out www.veganlunchbox.com.

Now Wyntergrace is working with the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine to get more schools on board. Veggie chili, veggie burgers, and more whole-grain and vegetable dishes are just a few of the options Wyntergrace says she'd like to see in more school cafeterias.

For more info, or to get involved, visit www.healthyschoollunches.org.