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## Lifestyle

# Is vegan becoming the new normal? We ask experts whether it's an option for all.

Should everyone cut meat, dairy and eggs from their diet for the sake of their health and the planet? Or has the move to veganism gone too far? Here are the pros and cons.

GRACE BALDWIN

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### Lifestyle

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Veganism is rapidly becoming 'the new normal!'

Walk into any supermarket and you'll find an ever wider range of vegan foods on display, from 'pulled oats', mock meat and nutritional yeast, to coconut yoghurt and 'milk' derived from everything but cows.

It's as if vegan, is rapidly becoming 'the new normal', as a generation moves towards a more environmentally sustainable way of living.

Many also claim it's a more ethical choice than eating meat.

But is going vegan, at all ages, the healthiest choice? And is it right for everyone?

Can going vegan leave you weak, pale, anaemic and unhealthy?

Or is it the healthy choice for you, and the planet?

## Is going vegan unhealthy or bad for muscle gain?

Nutritionist and podcast host Simon Hill made the transition to veganism after learning about the correlation between lifestyle diseases like cardiovascular disease and diet.

"We've normalised the diagnoses of so many health conditions for people as young as 40, and we put it all down to genetics," Mr Hill said.

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"In fact, your genetic makeup only accounts for around 20 per cent of health outcomes; the other 80 is up to you and your lifestyle."

Coming from a background of frequent meat consumption, Mr Hill said learning that eating animal-based protein was not a necessity was "confronting" at first.

"I thought I needed it to stay strong but as long as you're hitting protein targets, then globally leading researchers all agree that it doesn't actually matter what the source is."

Telethon Institute nutrition researcher and dietitian Amelia Harray said vegetarian diets could be healthier than omnivorous ones, "so long as the vegetarian foods are healthy".

Dr Harray, who researches the impact of nutrients and food in the management of diabetes in children, said vegetarian eating patterns had been associated with lower risk of premature death, while red and processed meats could increase the risk of colorectal cancer.

"Plant based alternatives to meat, such as legumes, nuts, seeds and tofu, have similar distinguishing nutrients while being naturally lower in saturated fat and higher in fibre," she said.

Vegan personal trainer and online fitness coach Forest Nash specialises in wholefood plant-based nutrition and concurs that animal-based protein is not necessary.

Mr Nash was raised vegetarian for ethical reasons and said his rationale was if he could live a long, healthy

life without harming animals, then that was what he would do.

“Before I went vegan, I saw a lot of people in the fitness community thriving and doing very well on plant-based diets and I figured I was already halfway there as a vegetarian,” Mr Nash said.

“It was definitely the best decision I’ve ever made; my performance, training and recovery are all better for it.”

He said the perception vegans were unhealthy and weak was pervasive, but he found breaking down the stereotype highly rewarding.

“There are no nutrients in an animal inclusive diet that you can’t access in a plant based one,” Mr Nash said.

You also don’t have to compromise your ethics or dietary preferences for your fitness goals – with the right assistance, being vegan doesn’t hold you back, it benefits you.”

He said he believed it was because of, not despite, his diet that he had won body building competitions and continued to smash his fitness goals.

Mr Hill said there were world class athletes at the peak of their physical performance who were thriving on vegan diets, including Lewis Hamilton, Venus Williams and Morgan Mitchell.

## **Can anyone go vegan?**

Despite much research proving the contrary, people tend to be concerned that adequate nutrition cannot be achieved through a vegan diet – specifically for nutrient vulnerable demographics, like infants, young women or the elderly.

“As far as I’m concerned, anything is possible, on paper,” Mr Hill said.

“I feel that some vegans have lost compassion and understanding for those who eat meat – it’s not always going to be realistic for everyone to go completely plant based.

“I’m more interested in meeting people where they’re at and encouraging them to be as plant based as is possible for that individual’s lifestyle.”

He said when planned with a professional, it was nutritionally safe and scientifically viable for a person of any age to go vegan without consequences.

“Still, not everyone has the time or resources to just go and turn their diet upside down overnight,” he said.

“What is theoretically possible and what’s realistically achievable are usually two different things.”

Mr Nash said anyone could make the change but recommended seeking professional help.

“For anyone interested in moving to a plant based diet, there are heaps of free resources available online to help. Research isn’t hard, but it is important,” he said.

Mr Hill said new research had shown despite the stereotype that vegans were deficient in essential nutrients,

omnivorous eaters were often lacking nutrients and minerals too; there were simply different blind spots.

“While vegans generally are deficient in vitamin B12, iodine and iron, meat eaters are largely lacking in folate, vitamin C and magnesium,” Mr Hill said.

## I’m ready to start eating more plant-based ... where do I start?

Mr Hill said the first place to start was diversifying your diet.

“Rather than looking at what you need to cut out, I find it’s best to start with what you can add,” he said.

“Try and eat 30 different fruits, vegetables, herbs, spices, nuts and seeds in a given week.”

He recommended increasing your exposure over a few months to more unique plants per week, as doing so straightens out people’s diets very naturally.

“Diversity is important because the prebiotics in any plant are all a bit different, and they selectively feed different microbes in your gut which keeps you healthy.”

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