

THE VEGAN *fling*



Is there an advantage to briefly adopting a diet free of meat, dairy and eggs? Those who want to reap veganism's quick health benefits think so.

BY EMILIE DINGFELD

ON DECEMBER 29 last year, at a waterfront restaurant in Miami, Jay Z and Beyoncé feasted on lobster risotto and seafood casserole. The meal marked the end of the power couple's much-publicized vegan challenge: no meat or animal products for 22 days. Diet watchdogs erupted in a flurry of discussion—some commended the duo's efforts, while others expressed disdain (one typical tweet: “No Surprise! Beyoncé and Jay-Z Abandon Their New #Vegan Diet.”)

To be fair, they never promised to eat this way forever. Jay Z referred to it on his blog as “a spiritual and physical cleanse”—a notion of temporary veganism that has been catching on lately. (Oprah has done it and longtime vegan Alicia Silverstone recommends vegan cleanses on thekindlife.com.) Google “vegan cleanse” and you'll find pages of results. After all, trendy detox programs almost always call for the elimination of most or all animal products, since meat, dairy and eggs are considered acid-forming (inflammatory). Some observers aren't impressed, claiming veganism is an all-or-nothing way of life—not something to be flirted with for a few days or weeks.

Marco Borges, Jay Z and Beyoncé's life coach and trainer, argues otherwise. “Instead of saying, ‘Jay and B, why did you start consuming animal products again?’ we should be saying congratulations.” Even small dietary changes should be celebrated. “When you create habits out of little things, great things happen as a result,” adds Borges, who is also founder of 22 Days Nutrition.

Indeed, it has been shown that eating more plants has benefits. Veganism boasts a feel-good factor that comes from promoting compassion for animals and reducing one's carbon footprint. And it can give rise to dramatic health benefits—including weight loss. A study in *The American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* found that vegans tend to be slimmer, and have lower serum cholesterol and blood pressure, than vegetarians (who are generally better off in those departments than meat eaters). However, it also found that they are at an increased risk for nutritional deficiencies of omega-3 fatty acids and micronutrients such as vitamin B12, vitamin D, iron, zinc and calcium. This isn't to say that deficiencies are inevitable; you just have to know where to get these nutrients and take supplements if necessary. Swiss chard and beans, for instance, are sources of iron, and fortified cereals and lentils are sources of zinc. There are also brands that offer vegan-friendly supplements, including Bodylogix, Genuine Health and Vega.

For Brendan Brazier, who is an endurance athlete, author of *Thrive Energy Cookbook* and the formulator of Vega nutritional products, it took a lot of trial-and-error before he found a diet that maximized his athletic performance. “I was able to recover more quickly [on a plant-

based diet], which was a big advantage in the world of sports, and I didn't have as much inflammation,” he says. “My flexibility was better, risk of injury went down. I had more energy and I slept more deeply.”

Being vegan doesn't guarantee optimal health, though. “There are so many vegan junk foods on the market now,” says Dr. Michael Greger, physician and founder of nutritionfacts.org. “It used to be that if you were vegan or vegetarian, you had to eat vegetables. Now there's vegan ice cream!” Brazier agrees that many newbies make mistakes when adopting a meat-less diet. “A lot of people load up on refined carbohydrates, so they'll eat pasta, rice and potatoes, and not really a lot of nutrient-dense foods like leafy greens. Then, of course, there's the protein question...” You can ensure you're getting enough of the muscle-building amino acids by eating a variety of legumes, seeds, nuts and whole grains.

While trying to break down your meals into micro- and macronutrients (fats, protein, carbs) can seem intimidating, it doesn't have to be. Nor is it required to blacklist your guilty pleasures (like buttery pastries). It's up to you to decide what you'd like to give up and for what reasons. For instance, prolific *New York Times* food writer Mark Bittman wrote *VB6: Eat Vegan Before 6:00 to Lose Weight and Restore Your Health...For Good*, a “flexible vegan diet,” when health issues related to high blood sugar, high cholesterol and being overweight forced him to choose between surgery, medications, or, as one doc suggested, a full-on vegan diet. (Because of his job, nixing all animal products was not an option.) His resulting *VB6* lifestyle not only alleviated many of his problems (he reduced his high blood sugar and cholesterol levels, cured his sleep apnea and lost 30 pounds in 12 weeks), but it also started a movement. Then, there are Meatless Mondays, wherein we can experiment with vegetarian and vegan meals on our favourite day of the week! Brazier's free online program at thriveforward.com provides heaps of information such as shopping lists, recipes and videos. You can also try the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine's 21-Day Vegan Kickstart (21daykickstart.org).

Whether you try a vegan cleanse, incorporate Meatless Mondays into your week or adopt a fully vegan diet, find what works for your life, says Borges. “It starts with being non-judgmental and understanding that there is no black or white. We live in a world where it's a ton of shades of grey.” ©

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