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Heart Smart Reasons To Veg Out

Some people forgo meat for ethical reasons; others don't like the taste. But a study in the *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* could motivate a new crowd of herbivores in search of better heart health.

British researchers tracked 30,000 meat eaters and 15,000 vegetarians ages 20 and older for 11 years. People who ate plant-based diets had a 30 percent lower risk of being hospitalized or dying from heart disease during that time than those who ate meat or fish.

The Roots of Good Health

Some of the difference could be explained by the vegetarians' leaner physiques. But even when controlling for body mass index – along with other heart health risks, including smoking and age – the reduced risk remained.

The real key, the study noted, may lie in a plant-based diets' positive effect on the blood vessels. Vegetarians had lower levels of LDL, or "bad," cholesterol. Plus, their systolic – or top blood pressure number – was an average of 3.3 mm Hg lower.

Veggies' Other Perks

This new research is just the latest evidence that avoiding animal products may improve health. Past studies have shown vegetarian diets may:

- Lower body weight and reduce the risk for obesity
- Ward off diabetes and improve blood glucose control, mood and quality of life in people who have it
- Reduce the risk for some cancers, including those in the gastrointestinal tract

Plan for the Best Nutrition

A vegetarian diet is only as good as the types of foods it contains. If you choose to skip meat, consume a wide variety of plant-based foods to meet all your nutritional needs. Focus on:

- Protein – found in beans, nuts, dairy, eggs and soy products
- Iron – found in peanut butter, eggs, beans and dark leafy greens
- Calcium – found in dairy products, fortified cereal and juice, tofu and broccoli
- Vitamin B12 – found in eggs, dairy and fortified foods

And don't fret if you're not quite ready to go all vegetarian all the time. You can still enjoy many health benefits by eating a diet that's heavy on veggies, but includes small amounts of fish and lean red meat. Try eliminating meat from a few meals a week or simply reducing your portion sizes of animal products.

Sources: American Journal of Clinical Nutrition, Jan. 30, 2013; Nutrients, May 27, 2014