Adolescent Vegetarianism and Its Harmful Impacts on Health

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“A vegetarian is defined as a person whose food consists of only vegetables and vegetable products” (Dula). Many adults and children refuse to eat meat, but some dislike vegetables. Both foods and food products are necessary for one’s life and health. Both contain vitamins, proteins, fats, etc. It is medically approved that meat contains more energy than vegetables. To meet all the requirements of one’s body, one should eat balanced food rather than depend on one food. People refuse to eat meat because they are concerned about animal rights and, in some cases, for other reasons. Even though vegetarian teenagers are concerned about animal rights or have other reasons for trying to be healthier, being on a vegetarian diet is risky for their health. Depending on only one type of food can lead to a lack of nutrition and many other health problems. Teenagers should eat enough meat and animal-based products to grow up healthy and with sufficient nutrients.

Why Adolescents Choose Vegetarianism

People become vegetarian for several reasons, such as weight loss, religious restrictions, influence from family and friends, concerns for animal rights, and inability to afford meat, which causes them to shift to vegetables. Some people quit eating meat because they want to avoid excessive use of environmental resources. Nowadays, becoming vegetarian has become easier because of the availability of plant-based diets throughout the year. “About 9 million adults including adolescents in the United States avoid eating meat and fish. About 2 million people completely avoid eating meat, fish, and animal-based products including eggs, cheese, milk, and gelatin” (Demory-Luce and Motil 01).

Most people become vegetarian because they are concerned about the rights of animals that are used as food. They think eating the meat of these animals is a violation of animal rights, as they think the slaughtering of animals can be murder, which is not acceptable. Religious obligations are also an important factor in people becoming vegetarian; some religions prohibit the use of animal meat as it is not considered a good virtue to kill other beings just for food. “Flesh food prohibitions such as the rejection of pork by Islam and Judaism, taboos relating to the slaughter of cattle and the consumption of beef among Hindus in India, and the strict vegetarianism associated with Jainism” (Beardsworth, Alan, & Teresa 256). These religious restrictions and taboos become a reason for people to quit eating meat.

Adolescents tend to adopt vegetarianism for many reasons, such as showing their independence, becoming more intimate with their peers, establishing their identity, or just being rebellious. They want to look different from their parents' generation and make their own decisions. Therefore, for many adolescents, becoming a vegetarian may be their first informed, adult decision. It is also stated that "it might be a way to express these developmental needs that have been noted for other behaviors such as smoking and use of alcohol" (Perry, Cheryl L., et al. 407). Adolescents are very concerned about their appearance, and they put lots of emphasis on that. During adolescence, the emphasis on appearance increases compared to other age groups. "This preoccupation with appearance puts them at greater risk for adopting a variety of dietary patterns in an attempt to look attractive and thin according to current vogue" (Perry, Cheryl L., et al. 407).

Nutritional Demands During Adolescent Growth

Vegetarianism has become more common and popular among adolescents in recent times. Adolescence is the age of growth of the body and brain. Therefore, it is necessary to eat sufficient food containing the nutrients the body requires. The food of vegetarians may constitute a healthier diet than that of meat eaters, but scientists have found that they may suffer from eating disorders.

"In a survey, about 10 percent of American girls aged 10 to 18 regard themselves as vegetarian, and some completely exclude meat from their food. Individuals with increasing nutritional needs such as infants, adolescents, and pregnant women may face difficulty meeting their nutritional needs on vegans' diet" (Meister 01).

Hence, adolescence is an age of increased nutritional needs; in that case, if adolescents depend only on vegetables, it will harm their health. They will likely face several health issues and will be more likely to lose weight.

Depending only on vegetables will put their health at risk. Plant food does not contain all the ingredients and vitamins needed by an adolescent's body. While depending only on vegetables, they are putting their health at risk. The restriction of food will decrease energy and could bring abundant harmful effects to the growing bodies of teenagers.

"Since the adolescent years are a time when bone density is determined, insufficient calcium intake may cause weak bones because vegetables have lower calcium than meat. The high protein content of animal products, when it is metabolized, leaves a lot of acids in the body, sulfur and sulfuric acids and these acids help calcium to dissolve out in the bones" (Klaper 208).

Vegetables could not provide the amount of calcium needed for the body. To obtain that amount, vegetarians need to eat more and more.

Vitamin and Mineral Deficiencies

Like calcium, vegetables lack many other essential vitamins that the body requires, especially during adolescence. Vitamin B12, iron, zinc, and omega-3 fatty acids are found in vegetables but are in very small amounts that cannot fulfill the body's requirements. Vitamin B12 is necessary for blood formation and cell division. If the intake of this vitamin is low, the body will not be able to carry out cell division and blood formation normally because plant food does not contain this vitamin, so vegetarians are more susceptible to this malfunctioning. The deficiency of vitamin B12 can also cause some serious health issues, leading to irreversible nerve damage. To avoid this shortcoming, vegetarians take supplements, which further complicate their health situation and cause pernicious anemia and neurological problems.

Similarly, iron is commonly thought to be lacking in plant foods. Particularly for girls, iron consumption is very important compared to boys. Iron is the central part of hemoglobin, which carries oxygen in the blood. If an appropriate amount of iron is not provided to the body, it can cause health issues. Dietary fiber prevents the absorption of non-heme iron by binding to it and reducing its bioavailability. Calcium phosphate, polyphenols, phytates, or bran found in coffee, tea, and soybean can reduce the absorption of non-heme iron, putting vegetarians at risk of iron deficiency.

Omega-3 fatty acids are important for the human body. They help in a person's mental and brain growth, so they are necessary for adolescents. They may be helpful in reducing the chances of cancer and cardiovascular disorders. Omega-3 fatty acids are found primarily in fish or their oil. As vegetarians do not get much of this important fatty acid, they can have a higher risk of health issues. Rough and dry, bumpy skin, dull or dry hair, sleeping problems, attention problems, and emotional sensitivity are some symptoms of a deficiency of omega-3 fatty acids.

Zinc is also vital for human health and is much needed during adolescence. Zinc plays a range of key roles in supporting healthy growth. It is required to break down complex protein molecules into simpler amino acids that support brain function and also support the growth and repair of muscle tissues.

"Zinc helps cells divide, which happens quickly and frequently during puberty, while it also builds and repairs DNA, the genetic material at the heart of all cells. Additionally, this powerful trace mineral speeds up reactions of about 100 enzymes some of them essential for digestion of foods for energy" (Bakan, Rita, et al. 229-233).

Thus, zinc should be provided to the body in a preferable amount, but the vegetarian diet does not have an adequate amount of zinc, so vegetarians are much more likely to have some abnormalities, considering the crucial role of zinc.

Eating Disorders, Depression, and Anxiety

Researchers have found that the percentage of eating disorders is higher among vegetarians. Those who choose vegetables for weight loss are more likely to deal with the problem of eating disorders. Constraints on eating animal-based products for the purpose of weight loss will lead to eating disorders. Different groups of vegetarians and non-vegetarians who choose a reason other than weight loss, such as religious concerns or taste preferences, have lower levels of nutritional restraint than semi-vegetarians who limit their intake of meat because of obesity. “They are also less likely to participate in healthy and unhealthy weight control behaviors than semi-vegetarians. Full vegetarianism may have played more of a role in the maintenance of eating disorder” (Timko, Alix, et al. 983). Adolescents who choose to eat plant-based food for the purpose of weight loss are now facing several medical issues, including reduced brain growth and eating disorders.

Being on a vegan diet can cause several other health issues, such as sudden weight loss, hair loss, low blood pressure, and many others. In girls, it can also create disturbances in their periods. Many people have quit vegetarianism because of these reasons. Researchers have also found that, with all these problems, vegetarianism has a direct effect on the brain, thus causing mental illness and depression in adolescents. According to a German study, vegetarians were 15 percent more prone to depressive conditions and twice as likely to suffer anxiety disorders.

“On a biological level, nutrition status resulting from a vegetarian diet may affect neuronal function and synaptic plasticity, which in turn influences brain processes relevant for onset and maintenance of mental disorders. Vegetarians have reported that “they have this terrible depression and anxiety, but they don’t know why” (Michalak, et al. 05).

The study compares a vegetarian adolescent with a non-vegetarian and finds that vegetarians were more depressed than non-vegans. They are more likely to have contemplated and attempted suicide than non-vegetarians. In another study, the researchers found that young vegetarians were reported to have more irregular eating behaviors, including intentional vomiting, laxative use, and higher rates of dieting. They were also reported as having low self-esteem, high social anxiety, and abnormal eating attitudes. “They might be at increased risk of binge eating with loss of control and extreme unhealthful weight-control behaviors such as diet pills, intentional vomiting, used laxatives and diuretics” (Michalak, et al. 10). These studies and research show that vegetarianism has become dangerous for adolescents and has caused many serious health problems for them.

Balanced Diets and Nutritional Compensation

For a healthier body and brain, adolescents need to eat balanced food. Beef is the only powerful ingredient for a healthy and active brain. This is the age of their mental and physical growth. Therefore, eating meat, fish, and animal-based products is important. Meat contains more vitamins and healthy nutrients than plant-based foods and products. For the better development of mental

growth, it is vital to consume meat. But if they still want to become vegans, then they must consult their doctor or nutritionist for guidance.

Being vegetarian has several health benefits, but only if you correctly follow the diet plan; eating a few vegetables will result in a deficiency of essential ingredients, proteins, and vitamins in the body. Also, vegetables do not contain all the key elements needed for the body, such as B12, iron, zinc, and many others. To compensate for these body requirements, adolescent vegetarians should eat whole soy foods, hemp seeds, chia seeds, flaxseeds, dark leafy greens, walnuts, and wheat germ. To compensate for the protein requirement, they should regularly eat seeds, nuts, whole soy foods, beans, and quinoa. A vegetarian diet is good as long as the essential nutrients found in animal products are compensated for.

Health Risks Beyond Appearance and Independence

Adolescent vegetarians should be concerned about their health rather than exercising their independence or the power to make a decision. It seems they are much more concerned about their appearance, looks, and animal rights than their health. “Vegetarians were significantly more likely to care about eating healthy food and less likely to care about being healthy” (Perry, Cheryl L., et al. 411). Vegetables are healthy, but they can cause weight loss and deficiency of many essential elements in the body, which will result in several health issues such as eating disorders, mental illness, and physical weakness.

It is very important for adolescents to have a balanced diet because they are at the age of mental and physical growth. If they ignore their health for appearance, it will be very harmful to them in the future and in the current situation. Especially for girls, it is extremely dangerous because they will lose weight and it will cause a disturbance in their periods, which will later create a problem during pregnancy and delivery. Giving birth to a child is not easy; numerous women have died during childbirth because of the tendency to bear pain and several other reasons. Disturbance in the periods can also affect pregnancy and childbirth.

Medical Guidance for Adolescent Vegetarians

Any individual who decides to adopt vegetarianism must consult his or her physician first. They should also consider the decisions of their parents because their parents have more experience and knowledge about what is better and what is worse. Being vegetarian has many health benefits, such as lower serum total and low-density lipoprotein cholesterol concentrations, a lower rate of coronary heart disease and cancer, lower blood pressure, low body weight, and a healthier lifestyle than non-vegetarians. But with all these health benefits, it has some dangerous and severe health issues, such as depression, anxiety, and eating disorders, and they are more likely to kill themselves.

The main problem that is concerning for doctors and parents is the increase in depression, mental illness, and suicidal approaches among adolescent vegetarians. These have raised concerns for parents and physicians. It is significant to counsel adolescents on the issues created by vegetarianism properly. They should be rightly guided on whether or not a shift to vegetarianism is necessary for them. Their decision should not be random and without any consultation from anyone. If they decide to become vegetarian, they must be guided on what to eat to overcome the deficiencies created by vegetables. They should be aware of the pros and cons of vegetarianism. Before putting their lives at risk, their nutritionist must guide them about the foods they should consume. Being on a vegetarian diet is a great thing, but only as long as the nutrients found in animal-based products are compensated for. Vegetarians should not avoid all animal products because plant-based food does not contain all the ingredients needed by the body.

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