

In Defense of Meat-Eaters

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ABSTRACT

Meat consumption is a custom that dates back thousands of years in human history. Plants and meat constitute a major portion of the diet and humans as omnivores require both for a healthy lifestyle. Recently, the trend of using plants as the only energy source has gained popularity causing people to replace meat in their diet. However, the absence of meat in the diet can lead to protein, zinc, iron, and B-vitamins deficiency consequently resulting in various health issues. Moreover, easy digestibility and high-quality meat protein play a significant role in human growth and development. Meat consumption is also considered a cultural identity for many nations. Therefore, its nutritional and cultural significance can't be overlooked.

Keywords: Meat consumption, omnivores, cultural identity, plant-based diet

Introduction

Meat consumption has been an important component of human evolution. About three million years ago the majority of humans' meals consisted of meat. Meat is the edible tissue from an animal consumed as food [1]. Many scientific researchers have been attempting to highlight the negative consequences of using animal-based products and how their consumption can lead towards non-communicable diseases [2]. In the 19th century, due to the growing awareness of the health benefits of a plant-based diet, the vegetarian moment started to gain popularity. Vegetarian diets consist of vegetables, fruits, whole grains, legumes, nuts, and seeds and exclude meats or seafood, or sometimes even eggs and dairy [3]. The development of plant-based alternatives to meat and other animal products has caused more people to shift towards a plant-based diet. All these factors collectively gave a new shift to human dietary patterns. However, the benefits associated with meat consumption can't be neglected. Because meat is recognized as an important source of high biological value proteins, haem iron, B vitamins, and minerals [4]. It should be taken into account that meat and meat products are still appreciated and preferred by the majority of people for their taste and organoleptic properties. Excessive consumption of one type of food is bad. Therefore, dietary diversity and quality should be maintained by choosing all food groups and not excluding meat from them.

Human as Omnivores

A popular concept around the world is that humans can easily survive on only plant-based diets and this can bring positive changes in the body. The point of concern is that these concepts are mostly focused on the pros of adopting a vegetarian diet and neglecting the meat group. Many people have become a part of the vegetarian moment just because it's trending or they are impressed by the benefits of a plant-based diet, without considering their body health and nutrition requirements. Vegans are at higher risk of iron, calcium, zinc vitamins B-12, and D deficiency with higher rates of osteoporotic fracture and iron deficiency anemia [5] [6].

The human species is omnivorous. An organism that can consume and survive on both plant and animal diets is an omnivore [7]. Their bodies are designed in a way to digest both meat and plants to attain maximum nutrition. Thus, the consumption of both plants and meat is of the utmost importance for an omnivore. Our ancestors used to hunt animals and consume plants to survive [8]. Before removing this major group from our diet, we need to compare the gains and the losses. As omnivores, humans can survive by only eating a plant-based diet but our goal should be a balanced and versatile diet. We should not simply settle for surviving and should be pushing for the best possible nutrition that we can get. So, it's important that we keep ourselves up-to-date on what's actually healthy for us.

Cultural Significance of Meat

Meat is not only a nutritional requirement but is embedded in the values and heritage of many countries and is also part of some religious beliefs [9]. Meat is a common ingredient in traditional cuisines. More than just a palate sacrifice is made when meat is avoided. People value it for reasons related to tradition and cultural purity. Pork is the most popular meat consumed in nations like China, where it has been a staple of the cuisine for thousands of years. Fish and other seafood have long been the mainstays of the Japanese diet. The most popular meats eaten in the UK are lamb and beef. The most popular meats consumed in the United States are beef and poultry, with burgers and fried chicken among the most popular foods. For Muslims around the world, it is a part of religious belief, where they sacrifice animals every year. Therefore, replacing meat is much more than a dietary intervention.

The Effects of Abandoning Meat

It is important to consider exactly what we can be missing out if we choose to completely abandon meat:

Iron: One of the most important parts of a healthy diet is iron. It is a building block of our red blood cells and thus crucial for the maintenance of a healthy and normal body. Of all the food groups, our body absorbs iron from meat the most. Heme iron from meat has a substantially higher absorption rate (up to 35%) than non-heme iron from plants (2-10%). Additionally, meat can improve the absorption of non-heme iron [10]. To match that level of iron by eating green vegetables, one has to consume a lot more of them. If don't, it can lead to anemia and other health problems. If switch toward supplements, then it requires multiple supplement intakes (vitamin C) to make sure the body is absorbing and utilizing that iron properly.

Protein: The main source of protein for the human body is meat. If one doesn't supplement enough protein in a diet, it can lead to muscle mass deterioration and weakness. Due to their reduced digestibility, lower levels of essential amino acids (particularly leucine), and lack of other necessary amino acids such sulphur amino acids or lysine, plant-based proteins have a weaker anabolic effect than animal proteins. As a result, plant amino acids are used for oxidation rather than the production of muscle proteins [11]. Since plant proteins are less digestible as compared to animal proteins, it requires consuming a much higher amount of beans and pulses as compared to meat to make up for this loss.

Vitamins: With a meatless diet it is much more likely to miss out on at least 5 of the B vitamins. The most important one of these is the B12 vitamin which, if not consumed in the proper amount, can lead to memory problems, numbness, fatigue, and anemia [12]. These vitamins can be obtained from plant-based sources or by taking supplements, but this is the main issue that leads to so many people

giving up on vegetarian diets. One needs to know exactly what is missing out and then need to find and consume individual sources to make up for the loss of each nutrient on a regular basis following a strict schedule. This leads to mental fatigue. All of these can be easily attained from a single animal source. Thus, replacing animal proteins in one's diet is no easy task.

Lack of energy: Feelings of tiredness and weakness will most likely prevail for long periods of time. This can be attributed to the reduced intake of proteins and vitamins. One may get used to the weakness at some point or may start taking some supplements to make up for the lack of energy. None of which is ideal. Energy supplements, unless prescribed, should never become a part of a regular diet.

Mental toll: It requires to have a strong belief and will to bring a meatless diet into effect. Most people, temporarily motivated, do lose focus as eating food starts to look more and more like a hard task and starts taking its toll on mental health. Having to constantly monitor what is missing and what should be included so one can get enough iron, vitamins, and protein every single day isn't the ideal of things. Thus, after a month or so, people start neglecting their diet and focus only on refraining from meat, without a proper diet plan. That can lead to hidden hunger and other health issues.

Is a Plant-Based Diet an Economical Alternative to Meat?

A common opinion that is brought up quite frequently is, a plant-based diet is cheaper than an omnivorous diet. According to a study, the global trend shows that a plant-based diet is a cheaper option in high-income countries. But in many Asian and African countries, where food prices continuously fluctuate, the situation is quite different. Converting to a plant-based diet is not only about taking meat out of the budget. It requires adding a lot of green vegetables, fruits, beans, and pulses, plant-based meat alternatives, getting regular supplements, and visiting the doctor or nutritionist regularly to see if we're getting proper nutrients. All of this is not cheap for a person that is earning an average income which is barely a couple of US dollars in some countries.

Conclusion

Meat is an important food group. It is a source of essential nutrients needed for human survival and excluding it can compromise health and nutritional status. As humans, we should be aiming for the best nutrition by keeping an inclusive diet approach. No food group should be excluded from the diet without any medical condition or allergies. The decision of choosing or neglecting any food group should be based on the pros and cons of its consumption effects on the overall health of an individual.

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