

# The SAGE Encyclopedia of Food Issues

## Veganism

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A vegan is a person who abstains from eating animal products, including meat, poultry, fish, dairy, and eggs, as well as any animal by-products. There are many different motivations for veganism, including health concerns, environmental preservation, and/or ethical principles. Vegans disturbed about the treatment of animals also oppose the use of animals for any commercial purpose, including the manufacture of fur, leather, silk, wool, and down; abstain from using animal by-products, including beeswax, carmine, and casein; and refuse to use products that are tested on animals or that otherwise exploit animals in their production. This entry explains the motives behind this diet and lifestyle, explores areas of disagreements among vegans, and reviews some of the critiques of veganism.

In 1944, Donald Watson coined the term *veganism* to distinguish itself from ovo-lacto vegetarians. Watson envisioned veganism to be an all-inclusive lifestyle aimed at doing the least amount of harm to animals in all aspects of life. In 1944, he cofounded the Vegan Society with Elsie Shrigley and four others. This organization continues to promote veganism as more than just a diet. According to a 2012 Gallup poll, approximately 2% of the U.S. population identifies as vegetarian. [p. 1420 ↓] Other studies indicate that about half of the vegetarians in the United States identify as vegan.

Accurate worldwide data are not available. Although a small percentage of the United States is vegan, veganism has become more prominent in American culture, particularly the culinary aspects of the lifestyle promoted in books and blogs.

## Motives for Veganism

### Health

Some individuals choose a vegan diet for the health benefits. Vegans typically eat foods rich in whole grains, vegetables, fruits, legumes, and nuts, which provide the major nutritional requirements. Plant-based diets are typically low in fat, sodium, and saturated fat; high in fiber; and have no dietary cholesterol. Soy products, including tofu, tempeh, and miso; legumes; nuts; seeds, including quinoa; and grains, such as brown rice, corn,

and whole-wheat pasta and bread, are high in protein. These products, in addition to many vegetables, such as leafy green vegetables, fulfill iron and calcium requirements. All types of food can be veg-anized, and more than 52 million recipes are available online.

Leading physicians promoting the vegan diet include T. Colin Campbell (author, with his son Thomas, of *The China Study*); Caldwell Esselstyn, of the Cleveland Clinic; John McDougall, author of *The McDougall Plan*; and Neil Barnard, founder of Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine. Their research, along with that of other nutritionists, concludes that a low-fat, plant-based diet can prevent and reverse many diseases worsened or caused by a Western, animal-based diet, including high cholesterol and heart disease, obesity, diabetes, and some forms of cancer.

A vegan diet may have some health risks. Low levels of vitamin D can lead to weak bones and osteoporosis; vitamin B12 deficiencies can lead to anemia, fatigue, and dementia; and the lack of omega-3 fatty acids EPA (eicosapentaenoic acid) and DHA (docosahexaenoic acid) can lead to fatigue, poor memory, and poor circulation and can weaken the immune system. Advocates of veganism note that although adequate vitamin D levels can be achieved by daily exposure to sunlight, vitamin D supplements should also be consumed to maintain the adequate levels. They also recommend sublingual forms of vitamin B12 and foods fortified with B12, omega-3 supplements, and consumption of algae and flaxseed oil.

Controversy exists concerning the risks and health benefits of soy. Researchers who emphasize the dangers of soy claim that soybeans are high in isoflavones and can increase levels of estrogen, hyperthyroidism, and the risk of cancer in rats. Researchers who promote the health benefits of soy point to nutritional research indicating that it reduces the risk of heart disease and of many cancers, improves bone health, and relieves menopause symptoms.

Eating a vegan diet does not ensure good health or good nutrition, and as with any diet, effort and balance are required to maintain optimal health. Not all vegans eat a low-fat, nutrient-rich diet. The emergence of meat analogs—“mock meats”—and dairy and egg substitutes has dramatically increased the amount of processed foods vegans

consume, resulting in increased consumption of baked goods and snack foods with high sugar and fat contents.

Many people turn to a vegan diet due to health risks that result from modern farming techniques. For maximum profit and efficiency, most farmed animals live in concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs), or a factory-like setting. Living in overcrowded and unsanitary conditions, these animals are fed antibiotics, growth hormones, antiparasitics, arsenic-based drugs, and slaughter and animal waste to increase production. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, 80% of all antibiotics used in the United States each year are routinely distributed in animal feed, not to treat illness but to prevent diseases that often occur as a result of the stressful and unhygienic conditions of CAFOs. Humans who eat meat are at risk of consuming those hormones and antibiotic residues and are being exposed to antibiotic-resistant bacteria through the consumption of [p. 1421 ↓ ] improperly cooked meat. Although the European Union has banned hormones in cattle production due to health concerns, the United States and Canada continue to use them.

Most dairy cows are injected with recombinant bovine growth hormone (rBGH) to increase milk production, but this hormone also causes an increased risk of mastitis, a bacterial infection of the udder. The dairy cows are treated with antibiotics to prevent these infections. Studies have found that cows injected with rBGH have increased levels of insulin growth factor-I. Excessive levels of insulin growth factor-I increase the risk of breast, colon, and prostate cancer. The American dairy industry is not required to label products that include rBGH. Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Japan, and the European Union have all banned the use of rBGH. CAFOs can also lead to the cross-contamination of food with animal feces resulting in increased rates of *Escherichia coli* 0157:H7 and *Salmonella* contamination of uncooked ground beef, chicken, unpasteurized milk and cheese, and eggs. *E. coli* 0157:H7 can cause food poisoning, dehydration, bloody diarrhea, and kidney failure. Meat and poultry are often contaminated during the slaughtering process, and seafood can be contaminated during harvesting.

## Environmental Concerns

Some individuals choose a vegan diet as a response to the environmental harms created by the industrialized food industries. They point to ways in which the production of livestock for food contributes to the destruction of the environment. Livestock emissions are a known source of greenhouse gas, and according to the United Nations Food and Agricultural Organization, they are responsible for 18% of all greenhouse gas emissions, widely believed to be a source of climate change.

Vegans concerned with environmental issues also note that farmed animals in the United States produce an overflow of animal waste. Manure flows into manure lagoons. When waste management is not controlled properly, rivers and streams become polluted, and the aquatic ecosystem is put at risk. Contaminated drinking water also becomes a health risk. The noxious gas produced by manure affects the air quality and can create or aggravate health concerns such as asthma.

The irrigation of feed crops on factory farming uses water inefficiently. Conservative estimates claim that approximately 2,500 gallons of water is required to produce 1 pound of beef, while only 25 pounds of water is required to produce 1 pound of wheat. The industry is also the largest source of water pollution since animal waste, antibiotics, hormones, fertilizers, and pesticides infiltrate the water supply.

Deforestation of rain forests is partially due to the mass production of animals for food. The agricultural industries have removed large expanses of the rain forest to grow soy and grains needed to feed livestock, leading to increased greenhouse gas production, land degradation, destruction of wildlife habitats, endangerment of species, and destruction of biodiversity.

## Ethics

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, approximately 112.1 million pigs and 32.5 million cows were slaughtered in the United States during 2013. During the same period, 185,015,000 chickens were sold for slaughter. Many vegans believe that it is

unethical to use and abuse animals for human consumption. Organizations such as the People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, the Humane Society of the United States, and Mercy for Animals have exposed abusive practices of the farming industries by conducting undercover investigations and videotaping their findings.

Critics argue that the conditions of farmed animals in CAFOs obstruct the natural behaviors and movement of the livestock and may lead to behavioral problems and physical deformities. Broiler chickens and turkeys are often crammed into large warehouses with little space to move. Egg-laying hens are frequently confined to battery cages that are stacked in tiers with four chickens per cage. Pigs are routinely confined to gestation crates so [p. 1422 ↓ ] small that they are immobilized and have no ability to turn around or lay down comfortably. Often, beef cattle live in crowded and dirty feedlots, while dairy cows rarely see daylight. Veal calves live their entire lives, about 5 months, in wooden crates so small that the calves cannot stand, turn around, or even lie down comfortably.

Those who argue for veganism from an ethical perspective also criticize the meat and dairy industries for confining animals in stressful, cramped living conditions in CAFO and for carrying out painful procedures such as castration, branding, tail docking, debeaking, and dehorning, sometimes without anesthesia. They also point to harmful physical effects on animals when artificial methods are used to increase cycles of egg laying in hens and to impregnate animals in order to increase the number of reproductive cycles. Another concern is the use of diets of grain, protein supplements, antibiotics, and growth hormones to hasten weight gain in the animals to be slaughtered.

## The Animal Rights Movement

Vegans concerned about treatment of animals often support the animal rights movement. The animal rights movement is not a monolithic movement. There are multiple perspectives that make up the larger animal advocate ideologies, including animal welfare, animal rights, and animal liberation.

The animal welfare movement works to improve conditions in the animal industries, particularly the food industries. Although these advocates of animal welfare believe that human animals have the right to use other animals for their needs, they believe that human animals have the obligation to treat these animals with respect and to reduce their suffering. The animal rights and animal liberation movements believe that animals have the inherent right not to be used for human use and consumption. Animal rights activists seek social justice for animals, which they believe to be voiceless and exploited. Animal rights activists also seek to end speciesism, the ideology that promotes allegiance to one species (human animals) over another (non-human animals). They argue that this ideology is not simply an anthropocentric prejudice, but it is structurally and systematically embedded into the institutions and culture of society. Animal rights activists equate speciesism with racism, sexism, heterosexism, and class exploitation.

Among the prominent thinkers of these movements are the philosophers Peter Singer, Tom Regan, Steven Best, and Carol Adams and the legal scholar Gary Francione.

## Debate Within Veganism

Although veganism is a central tenet for animal rights activists, significant debate exists within the movement. The first debate centers on whether vegans should promote veganism for health, environmental, or ethical reasons. This produces a division between “health” vegans, also known as “plant-based eaters,” and “ethical” vegans. Some leaders in the vegan movement embrace the opportunity to teach others about the diet. They encourage any approach to persuading omnivores to eat less meat and argue that factors motivating veganism are irrelevant if the goal of reducing animal suffering is achieved. Other vegans are concerned that the human health approach is too limited and ignores the ethical aspects of not eating animals. They are concerned that an emphasis on health dilutes the larger commitment to animal rights or liberation. Ethical veganism is more than a diet; it is a philosophy, politic, ethic, and lifestyle structured around a philosophy of animal rights. Vegan identities are often fostered by a community of like-minded people in dialogue with those who reject veganism.

Another debate revolves around the best methods to promote veganism. Vegan activists question whether it is most effective to encourage radical or gradual change, to use nonconfrontational approaches that emphasize education, or to employ a radical approach that shocks people and forces them to visualize the abuse that farmed animals face.

A third debate occurs within the animal advocacy segment of vegan activists and revolves around what type of institutional social change animal advocate organizations should promote. Some animal rights activists, who align themselves [p. 1423 ↓ ] with the animal liberation and abolition movement, often critique animal rights groups such as PETA (the People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) and HSUS (the Humane Society of the United States) for working on animal welfare bills to improve conditions in factory farming and to promote small farms. They believe that working with the animal industrial complex defeats the ultimate goal of freeing animals from exploitation and that animal welfare reform makes consumers likelier to feel good about their animal consumption. The animal food industries have adopted and embraced labels that often have unclear legal definitions, such as “humane,” “cruelty free,” “cage free,” “free range,” “pasture raised,” and “organic,” to appeal to consumers’ concerns about animal welfare. Unfortunately, these terms have very limited meaning. While “cage-free” hens may not be in cages, they may still be confined with thousands of other hens and never see daylight. Most chickens, whether they are raised in backyards, small farms, or industrialized CAFOs, are bought from hatcheries that engage in the mutilation explained above. In addition, the fate of animals on small farms and/or living in cage-free conditions is to be slaughtered for food, and these will often travel long distances to slaughterhouses in subpar conditions. While living in cage-free environments is certainly an improvement in the eyes of animal welfarists, animal rights and animal liberationists point out that it is certainly not cruelty free and that there is no such thing as “happy meat.”

## Critiques of Veganism

Some people have critiqued veganism as a privileged lifestyle. Vegan products like soy, mock meats, dairy substitutes, and other prepackaged foods can be expensive. These products may also not be available in mainstream grocery stores and neighborhood

convenient stores. Cooking is time-consuming, and vegan options are rarely available in fast food stores. Many cultural, ethnic, and religious traditions are food centered and include animal products. Finally, those without access to the Internet and books may not have knowledge about veganism.

While some of these critiques are valid, vegan advocates argue that veganism can be done on a budget. Rice, beans, and potatoes are inexpensive foods and happen to be the staple for many ethnic diets. Beans and nuts are more affordable if bought in bulk, and frozen or canned vegetables are cheaper than fresh vegetables. These foods are also less expensive than many cuts of meat and poultry. In addition, meat and dairy are inexpensive as a result of government subsidization of these industries. When affordable kitchen appliances, such as pressure cookers, slow cookers, and food processors, make cooking less time-consuming, and access to the Internet provides quick information on vegan health, products, recipes, and communities. There is even a cosmetic company that sells vegan makeup for one dollar, although high-end vegan luxury products can be very expensive. Finally, nonleather shoes and accessories are cheaper than leather goods and cotton, and synthetic fibers are cheaper than wool and fur. While not possible for all people, given sufficient information and access to food choices, individuals could adopt a vegan lifestyle if chosen.

**See also** [Animal Rights](#); [Factory Farming](#); [Vegetarianism](#); [Vegetarianism and Veganism, Health Implications](#)

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