

Food Choice, October 2006.

Modified Vegetarian Program

In the 21 October 2006, Wall Street Journal there was a most interesting article by Kelly Greene entitled “Aging Well”. I found this article particularly interesting because, for at least five years, I have described my food intake program as being 80% vegetarian. It is always gratifying to find a personal practice confirmed.

Ms. Greene describes a program where, “you get the bulk of your calories from vegetables, fruits, whole grains, soy, beans and nuts. Yet unlike full-time vegetarians, one also consumes some fish, fowl and meat.” She also points out that “some studies show that people who follow a flexitarian diet also reap most of the same health benefits as those who abstain from animal products altogether –and are healthier and thinner and may even live longer than people who have a heavy meat diet.”

“In an article published earlier this year, scientists at Oxford University in England looked at reams of data comparing the health of vegetarians with ‘health-conscious non-vegetarians’, meaning flexitarians, in affluent, Western countries. Health-conscious non-vegetarians are defined as regularly or occasionally eating meat or fish.”

“The data we have show no clear differences” between the two in total mortality, blood pressure, incidence of stroke, or rates of colorectal, breast and prostate cancers, says Timothy Key, the lead author of the article and principal investigator at Oxford for the European Prospective Investigation of Cancer and Nutrition, which is studying links between diet, cancer and other chronic diseases by following 520,000 people in 10 European countries.”

“Vegetarians – particularly vegans – still have a slight edge when it comes to body-mass index and heart disease, says Mr. Key. But overall, eating meat occasionally ‘is not having a massive effect on people who try to eat healthfully. “

Ms. Greene continues: Other research shows flexitarianism’s effect on body weight. In a 2003 study, researchers in Stockholm, Sweden, and at the U.S. Department of Agriculture Human Nutrition Research Center on Aging at Tufts University in Boston looked at 55,000 Swedish women and found that even “semi-vegetarians,” who consume some meat, have a lower risk of being overweight or obese than their omnivorous counterparts. The full-fledged meat eaters were “significantly heavier” than any of three vegetarian groups in the study. (In addition to semi-vegetarian, the researchers analyzed the diets of lacto-vegetarians, who eat no meat or eggs, and vegans, who eat no meat, eggs or dairy products.) The semi-vegetarians in the study ate 0.1 serving of red meat a day, 0.02 servings of poultry and 0.34 serving of fish. In contrast, the omnivores had 1.1 servings of meat, 0.06 serving of poultry and 0.28 serving fish.

Finally Ms. Greene asks the question: “So how many people are eating this way so far? There’s no firm head count. Vegetarian Resource Group, a Baltimore nonprofit that researches vegetarianism, finds consistently that about 7% of the population eats no meat.

IJP comments: Reasons for my selecting an 80% rather than a 100% vegetarian food choice program was based on an observed effect of meat on the heat resistance of bacterial spore crops. We were able to grow more resistant bacterial spores, especially *Clostridium sporogenes*, when we used a meat infusion medium (pork or beef heart) rather than just a non-meat nutritional medium.

I reasoned that if a little red meat in the sporulation medium increased spore resistance over a non meat medium, adding a little red meat to my vegetarian food intake might be good for my health.