

Plant Foods and Public Health: Is it time for a vegan public health initiative?

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Disease and diet

- Food-related ill health costs the NHS £6 billion p.a.
- Responsible for c.10% of UK deaths & illnesses: 'the vast majority' of these are related to unhealthy diets rather than food-borne diseases¹

Plant foods and health

- 'Worldwide, insufficient intake of fruit & vegetables is estimated to cause c.14% of gastrointestinal cancer deaths, c.11% of ischaemic heart disease deaths & c.9% of stroke deaths'²
- 'Consuming at least eight portions (80g each) of fruits & vegetables a day had a 22% lower risk of fatal IHD' (compared with <3 portions a day) & 'a one portion (80g) increment in fruit & vegetable intake was associated with a 4% lower risk of fatal IHD'³

Animal foods and health

- Red meat consumption is associated with an increased risk of total, CVD, & cancer mortality⁴
- Meat consumption increases the risk of type-2 diabetes⁵
- Consumption of eggs may increase risk of developing a lethal form of prostate cancer among healthy men⁶
- Sufficiently high levels of PCBs & mercury in fish & seafood to pose risks to consumers⁷
- Associated with lower fruit & vegetable intake⁴

Low levels of plant food consumption (UK)⁸

- 2010: 25% of men, 27% of women & 20% of children (aged 5 to 15 years) consumed the recommended 5 A DAY
- Between 2009 & 2010: a 33% increase in children in England who included no fruit & vegetables in their diet
- About 1 in 15 people (adults & children) included no fruit & vegetables in their diet in 2010

UK dietary advice:

4 major online sources of public health information in the UK were reviewed. These sites:

- Focus on the health risks of plant-based diets;
- Fail to report the health benefits of plant-based diets;
- Often ignore the existence of plant-based diets;
- Do not provide information for those following plant-based diets;
- Ask us to **add** fruit & vegetables, not meal plan around them



Is it time for a vegan public health initiative?

- USDA recommends a 'Shift [in] food intake patterns to a more plant-based diet that emphasizes vegetables, cooked dry beans and peas, fruits, whole grains, nuts, and seeds'¹⁷
- Canada's Food Guide promotes plant-orientated meal planning & recommends meat alternatives such as beans, lentils & tofu "often"¹⁸

Plant-based diets and health

- German vegans consume on average, 1458g per day of fruit & vegetables (i.e. over 18 A DAY): around 5.5 times higher than that consumed by the average German population⁹
- US vegans consume more grains & breads, vegetables, fruit, legumes, & nuts & seeds than non-vegans, with consumption of fruit, vegetables & legumes more than twice as high¹⁰
- Vegan diet seems to confer lower risk for overall & female-specific cancers compared to other dietary pattern¹¹
- 'Vegetarian diets...were associated with a substantial & independent reduction in diabetes incidence' with vegans faring best of all¹²
- 57% lower risk of IHD among life-long vegans compared with non-vegans, plus lower rates of hypertension, obesity, type-2 diabetes, stroke & food allergy¹³

Are cautions about vegan diets necessary?

- At all stages of the lifecycle, well planned vegetarian & vegan diets are healthy, nutritionally adequate and may provide health benefits in the prevention and treatment of certain conditions¹³
- Vegans have an above average healthy lifestyle & consume a well-balanced diet with high nutrient densities, although the intakes of calcium, iodine & B12 need to be improved⁹
- Increased fracture risk not inherent to vegan diet¹⁴
- Vegans do not have significantly lower bone mineral densities¹⁵
- Potentially lower nutrient intakes are easily avoided¹⁴
- By following simple guidelines vegan diets have 'many advantages ...& cannot be bettered for promoting human health'¹⁶

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