TOP TEN MYTHS RELATED TO VEGETARIANISM

MYTH #1: Vegetarians don't get enough protein.
FACT: Vegetarians get plenty of protein, without even trying. Your protein intake is directly proportional to the number of calories you consume. Therefore, only people who are starving to death need to worry about their protein consumption. In fact, the disease linked to inadequate protein consumption is an unfamiliar one - it's called *kwashiorkor*. But you probably have heard of diseases linked to *excess* protein consumption, such as cancer of the breast, prostate, pancreas, and colon; osteoporosis; and kidney stones. Since meat is excessively high in protein, it is a wise choice to reduce your intake of protein from animal sources and switch to plant sources.

MYTH #2: Vegetarians have to combine protein and be very finicky in planning meals.
FACT: Vegetarians don't need to worry about protein combining! It turns out that our bodies are smarter than we thought. According to the American Dietetic Association's position paper on vegetarianism, protein combining is completely unnecessary. As long as you eat food from a variety of plant sources, you don't need to fret about a thing.

MYTH #3: If you are an athlete, you have to eat meat.
FACT: A vegetarian diet is optimal for athletic performance. Numerous studies show that vegetarians often have more endurance than meat-eaters, and that performance differences are attributable to diet. But just look at the many famous vegetarian athletes. Dave Scott, a vegetarian, has won the Ironman Triathlon more times than any other person - a record six times. Sixto Linares, also a vegetarian, broke the world record for one-day triathlon in 1985. Edwin Moses, the Olympic Gold medalist in track, is a vegetarian. Andreas Cahling won the 1980 Mr. International title. He is a vegetarian. Estelle Gray and Cheryl Marek hold the world's record for cross country tandem cycling. Guess what? They are vegetarians. And the list goes on. A related point: Some people think that athletes need gobs more protein than others. In reality, athletes also have only slightly higher protein requirements than the rest of us, which can be easily met on a vegetarian diet. So do your kidneys and bones some good and throw away that Mega-Gain!

MYTH #4: Adequate iron consumption is a problem for vegetarians.
FACT: Vegetarians are less likely to suffer from anemia, or iron deficiency, than are meat-eaters. Fruits and vegetables contain vitamin C, which helps your body to absorb iron. Some sources of iron are spinach, cucumber, cauliflower, Chinese cabbage, bell peppers, broccoli, mushrooms, and tomatoes.

MYTH #5: There is no link between your diet and your risk of cancer.
FACT: Between 35 and 60 percent of all cancers are related to dietary factors. Studies of vegetarians show they have cancer rates that are only one-half to three-quarters of those of the general population. Populations that eat plant-based diets have dramatically lower rates of breast cancer, colon cancer, and other types of cancer. Why do vegetarian diets help protect against cancer? First, they are lower in fat and higher in fiber than meat-based diets. But other factors are important, too. Vegetarians usually consume more beta-carotene, a plant pigment and cancer-fighting agent. Also, for reasons scientists are as yet uncertain, vegetarians have more "natural killer cells," a kind of white blood cell that seeks out and destroys cancer cells.

MYTH #6: When you get old, your arteries clog up and there's nothing you can do about it.
FACT: You have ultimate control over the health of your arteries. No one has to die of heart disease or clogged arteries. The most recent research has shown that not only are heart disease and atherosclerosis preventable, they are reversible. Dr. Dean Ornish demonstrated this first in 1990 by putting a group of heart disease patients on a vegetarian diet deriving 10% calories from fat. Within a year, 82% of the patients showed signs of reversal in their heart disease. This was truly an amazing development, since previously heart disease was though to be treatable only by surgery. It is said that someday it may constitute malpractice for a physician not to mention to a heart patient the benefits of changing his or her diet. Also, contrary to popular opinion, older people aren't the only ones who should worry about their arteries. Fatty deposits begin accumulating for many people when they're teenagers. The key to healthy arteries is minimizing cholesterol and fat in your diet. This is best accomplished by eliminating meat, dairy products, and eggs.

MYTH #7: We need cholesterol in our diets, or our bodies won't function properly.
FACT: Our bodies manufacture all the cholesterol we need. Dietary cholesterol is not a necessary nutrient. And, you may be surprised to learn, cholesterol can only be found in meat, dairy products, and eggs. (Eggs are the most concentrated source of all.) Plant foods have no cholesterol. Dietary cholesterol in your body acts to clog your arteries and raise your blood pressure. In the 1970's, when the link between dietary cholesterol and heart disease became known, people started cutting down on their intake of cholesterol and saturated fat. They started eating less meat and fewer eggs. The meat and egg industries are like any other industries, and wanted people to keep buying their products. So they have begun a misleading campaign that "our bodies need cholesterol for proper function." This is true, but our bodies make all we need. Dietary cholesterol raises the LDL ("bad") cholesterol in our blood, and exercise raises the HDL ("good") cholesterol.

MYTH #8: Milk is necessary for human health.
FACT: Drinking milk is not only unnecessary, it is harmful. Dairy products are quite high in fat, especially saturated fat. And all that saturated fat and cholesterol clog your arteries. Don't let that 2% label fool you. That's 2% fat by *weight*, but it's actually 31% fat by calories. But even if you drink skim milk, you are still ingesting the milk *sugar*, lactose. Twenty percent of Caucasians and 80% of blacks don't have any lactose in their intestines, so drinking milk causes them digestive problems. Those who can digest lactose have to worry about the associated by-product of lactose digestion, galactose, a substance which is suspect in the formation of cataracts. Populations that drink a lot of milk have a much higher incidence of cataracts. Really, you've got to wonder where we ever got the idea that human nutrition depended on drinking a glandular secretion meant for a certain period in a baby cow's growth. Plenty of other cultures, such as Chinese, get along fine without it.

MYTH #9: Osteoporosis is the disease that you get if you don't drink enough milk.
FACT: Osteoporosis is not caused by calcium deficiency, but rather by too much protein in the diet. Consuming too much protein creates an acid condition in the blood, and scientists think that your body then uses calcium, which has a basic pH, from your bones in order to maintain the balance. Drinking more milk doesn't solve the problem, because milk is simultaneously high in calcium and protein. In fact, countries with the highest dairy product intakes (US, Sweden, Finland, and the UK) also have the highest rates of osteoporosis. A better choice than dairy products is to switch to more plant sources of calcium, such as broccoli, carrots, onions, chickpeas, navy beans, corn bread, figs, or calcium-fortified orange juice. Other factors that are important for preventing osteoporosis are regular exercise and not smoking.

MYTH #10: Vegetarian food is boring.
FACT: Vegetarian foods are the most exciting and diverse to be found anywhere! The food traditions of many other cultures are primarily vegetarian, such as Indian, Middle Eastern, and Chinese. When you decide to become vegetarian, you embark on a culinary journey of wonderful new tastes and smells. The diversity of other cultures' cuisine makes standard American fare look pretty boring. When you think about it, it's actually the vegetables, plant foods, and spices that make the same old meat look interesting. Of course, if you're married to the taste of meat, you can transition using substitutes, such as Yves Veggie Dogs or Morningstar Farms Chik Patties. They taste authentic, and bet you won't miss the taste of meat!

All nutritional facts are fully documented in Food for Life *by Neal Barnard, MD and* Diet for a New America *by John Robbins.*