

Plant-based eating

A. Who doesn't eat meat?

How popular is not eating meat? Well, it's hard to say. In some countries, like South Korea, only 3% of people do not eat meat. In the UK, around 7-10% are vegetarian, vegan or follow a plant-based diet, meaning they avoid meat, fish, eggs or dairy products. The vegans do not eat anything that comes from animals and do not use animal products, like leather or wool. A country where the numbers are much higher is India, with over 400 million vegetarians. India isn't completely meat-free, but plant-based eating is connected to the concept of Ahimsa, which means kindness towards all living things.

Wherever you may live, eating less meat is becoming more popular. Sometimes called 'flexitarian' or 'reducetarian', more and more people are choosing to eat fewer meals containing meat each week, or are giving up certain types of meat. Organisations such as the World Health Organisation and the United Nations recommend that we decrease our meat consumption.

B. But why?

When you first think about why people might not want to eat meat, you might think of animal welfare. This is true - often people do have real concerns about the treatment of the animals we eat. Farming practices mean some of these animals often live in distress, despite regulations.

But other factors also influence people's choices about eating meat. Health is a very common reason. This might be because studies have linked red or processed meat to increased health risks, or because of other food safety concerns. People have also said that saving money is another factor that influences them because a plant-based diet can be cheaper if it has a base of lentils, chickpeas and beans, for instance.

C. Environmental impact

However, perhaps the biggest reason for the rise in plant-based eating is the environmental impact - meat production is one of the most destructive human activities for our planet. Changing our diet would be a very effective way to be greener.

Meat and dairy uses around 80% of farmland, according to the Yale School of Forestry, and is the biggest cause of deforestation in every Amazon country. This causes huge environmental damage by releasing very large amounts of carbon dioxide (meat and dairy production account for 60% of agriculture's greenhouse gas emissions). In addition, it uses a lot of water. For example, it takes an average of 3140 litres of water to produce a hamburger. Plant-based burgers can use at least 75% less.

D. Want to try?

Many people find it difficult to imagine cutting meat from their diet completely. This might be one reason why 'meat-free days', when you don't eat any meat on a particular day of the week, are becoming popular. Other campaigns and events include Veganuary (when you go vegan for January) and World Vegetarian Day on 1 October. And with the rise in people interested in reducing meat consumption has come an increase in vegetarian and vegan food options and recipes. Online searches for 'veggie recipes' or 'plant-based cooking' have risen a lot in recent years, and so have the amount of recipes!

Whether you try adding a plant-based recipe into your week, or you find that meat-free Mondays work for you, either are a positive step. Why not try it and see what happens!