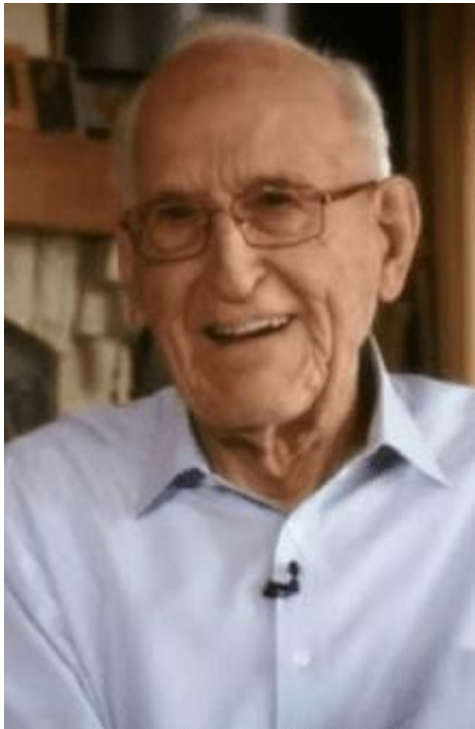


## The Taboo Topic: Sickness and Vegans

From [Victoria Moran, CHHC, RYT-200, MainStreetVegan.net](#)

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I went vegetarian in 1969 and starting my observations of the vegan/vegetarian world started soon after. Over these decades I've come to know hundreds and ultimately thousands of people who changed their diet for reasons of ethics, health, or both. And I've long noted the incredible discomfort we different-drummer diners have with those among us who become ill, or who pass away before turning 90.



*Ellsworth Wareham, MD, ate a fully plant-based diet, practiced surgery into his nineties and lived to be 104. He's an inspiration but not the norm.*

The first case I remember was a modestly prominent spokesperson on the health side of things who had cured himself of ulcerative colitis. That condition stayed in abeyance but another malady — cancer, maybe, or something with his heart — took him in middle age. “What do you think he did wrong?” I heard people whisper.

When Nathan Pritikin succumbed to leukemia after famously overcoming a heart condition, we were able to say: “Well, he ate low-fat, but he wasn't vegetarian.” When it was one of our own struck by illness, though, many either questioned their choices — “She ate a lot of processed food” — or concocted some reason why the unthinkable had happened: incredible stress, exposure to toxic chemicals, too many years of “living conventionally” prior to seeing the light.

The origins of our horror at being as mortal as anybody else are easy to trace. 19th and early 20th century vegetarians fell into two camps, not so different from the ones we see today. Some adopted the regimen to save their lives or build their health; they needed this to work or they'd be proven wrong, perhaps tragically so.

The others, the ones who turned from meat, as writer Isaac Bashevis Singer put it, “for the health of the chickens,” also had something to prove: they had to stay at least as healthy as they’d been before or they’d be selling out the animals.

When veganism came on the scene in the 1940s, calling for the elimination even more components of what was believed to be a “balanced diet,” the challenge to evidence its safety and nutritional adequacy became more pressing than ever. A vegan who got sick before reaching advanced age could set back the fledgling movement.



*Neal Barnard, MD, founder of Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine, has long been a champion of both health-promoting vegan eating and animal rights.*

So here we are. The movement is growing and thriving, and yet we’re living in a world mad with stress and wracked by pollution. There’s radiation in the atmosphere radiation from nuclear explosions and accidents. The ill effects of DDT still affect us, long after its being banned in most places. And a steady stream of viral and bacterial scourges, usually zoonotic in origin, wreaks havoc on some part of the world or, in the case of HIV and more recently Covid-19, the whole world. All this is before we even get to the food. Soil is depleted of nutrients. Most people can’t afford to eat all organic all the time. Fast food and convenience foods get into most people’s diets because it’s late and we’re tired.

Are these lapses from kale-kissed perfection the reason people get sick? Maybe, but so much is still misunderstood. Autoimmune disorders, Lyme disease, depression and anxiety, chronic fatigue, thyroid disorders, dementia, and all manner of digestive disturbances run rampant. Some people change their diet and find relief. Whether by eating Whole Food Plant-based No Oil, or raw food, or macrobiotic, or by juice-cleansing for long periods and eating “clean” in between, many folks do get well and this is thrilling. The health stats of vegans are promising indeed, and some tweaks can make a real difference for many people, but it’s not a slam-dunk for everybody. The last thing someone struggling with chronic disease or a scary diagnosis needs to worry about is not measuring up because their body, for whatever reason, is unable to maintain perfect health. They may need medication, or surgery, or a CPAP machine. They may seek alternative therapies. None of that is my business.

This is what I try to remember when a fellow vegan is ill:



- I don't know why this is happening. Their doctors may not even know. This vegan deserves love and support and humor and good wishes, not second-guessing.
- Unless I'm asked for an opinion or a suggestion, I don't give one. The ailing vegan has probably already been told to try wheat grass juice, ozone therapy, Dr. So-and-so's protocol, and the energy healer with a two-year wait list. It's overwhelming.
- This person probably already feels that they've "done something wrong." It's my job to assure them of all they do right. They're vegan, for heaven's sake. They've made a rare and radiant lifestyle choice for the benefit of all beings. They're bright and compassionate and amazing — even if they feel like hell, are scared to death, and feel guilty for turning to Western medicine (or for choosing not to do that). They can use some reassurance: "You, like Baby Bear's porridge, are 'just right.'"
- If they're in a hospital or nursing home, they're enmeshed in a health care system that doesn't know beans about what vegans eat and even less about what vegans value. It's my job as this vegan's friend or relative to be sure they have the kind of food they want, and maybe to intercede on their behalf with dietitians and other staff.
- While someone who's sick may look different, may not be able to walk around, and may be surrounded with medical paraphernalia, they're still themselves. I need to see the person, not the condition.



*Brooke Goldner, MD, overcame severe lupus through a diet that's animal-free and life force-abundant.*

- And it's my job to envision this person well and thriving. Even the diagnosis is dire, I have no right to project anything negative into the situation. I'm supposed to hold my friend in my highest thoughts and wrap them in all the light and prayers I can come up with.

Sometimes people get sick. Vegans too — even vegans with the squeaky-cleanest food choices you ever saw. We're all doing the best we can to live our own best lives. As a group, vegans tend to make a lot of really healthy choices. But life has been known to take detours.

As we've heard, none of us gets out of here alive. But we can get out of here without having judged our fellow vegans, and trust that when we're the one faring poorly, there will be another vegan in our circle, supporting us no matter what.



**Victoria Moran** is a prolific author and the founder and director of [Main Street Vegan Academy](#), training and certifying Vegan Lifestyle Coaches and Educators. She is also a cofounder of the [Compassion Consortium](#), an online spiritual community for vegans and pre-vegans.

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