

What a Vegan Is and Isn't, Explained

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A short primer on veganism, both the strict and not-so-perfect kind.



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Veganism has experienced a surge in popularity over the last decade, with the [number of Americans following vegan diets](#) growing from 1 percent of the population to 6 percent over a three-year period between 2014 and 2017. While there are a number of reasons for the upward trend, there are also many misconceptions around [what vegans eat](#), what they don't eat, and [what exactly being a vegan means](#).

What Is a Vegan?

Veganism can take several forms, but at the broadest level, a vegan is somebody who doesn't use or consume animal products. This refers not only to animal-based foods like meat and dairy, but also clothes, cosmetics, glues, cleaners and other non-food items that include animal derivatives in their ingredients. There are also some products that don't include animal derivatives in them, but do utilize animal derivatives at some point during the production process; for instance, certain [sugars are filtered through charred livestock bones](#) in order to make them white. Many vegans don't consume those products, either.

Vegans of the above sort are [often called "lifestyle vegans,"](#) as their commitment to forgoing animal products extends to all areas of their lives. However, many people use the term "vegan" to refer to "dietary vegans" — people who don't eat foods with animals in them, but do permit themselves to use non-food products made from animals, such as glue or leather.

What Are the Different Types of Vegans?

In addition to the differences between lifestyle vegans and dietary vegans, there are several different varieties of dietary veganism that are worth teasing out.

Raw Food Vegans

As the name suggests, [raw food vegans only eat foods](#) that aren't heated or cooked. Raw food vegan diets tend to be heavy in fruits, nuts, seeds and legumes.

Whole Food Vegans

In addition to forgoing animal products in their diets, [whole food vegans also restrict themselves](#) to non-processed foods. The diets of whole food vegans often look similar to the diets of raw food vegans, except whole food vegans have no qualms about cooking their food.

Junk Food Vegans

There are an abundance of healthy vegan foods out there, but there are plenty of unhealthy ones as well. Oreos, Pop-Tarts and Nutter Butter cookies are all vegan, for instance, and so are many other cookies, donuts, frostings, pies and other foods that aren't so great for one's health, whether vegan or not. While junk food vegans may not be doing their own health any favors, they're still benefiting the environment and animals by cutting meat and dairy out of their diets. And it's not always all or nothing. There are [many people, including vegans, who eat a mostly healthy](#) diet, but also indulge in the occasional junk food treat.

Imperfect Vegans, Reducetarians and Flexitarians

Some people want to be vegans, but have trouble committing to full-time dietary veganism for one reason or another. Others are simply interested in eating a more plant-forward diet rather than strict veganism. As such, some people create parameters for their veganism or meat reduction goals; for example, they might only eat animal products on weekends, or holidays, or for dessert or when the food in question would otherwise be thrown out.

Whether or not strictly vegan, eating a [plant-rich diet is one of the most powerful forms of individual climate action](#), according to Project Drawdown. Getting more people to eat less meat would not only help reduce climate emissions, but also reduce [air and water pollution](#), [animal suffering](#), [risk of zoonotic disease](#) and [labor abuses](#).

What's the Difference Between a Vegan and a Vegetarian?

Vegetarians do not eat meat, but do allow themselves to eat non-meat products that are derived from animals. Foods with eggs, milk, cheese and honey are all fair game for vegetarians; beef burgers, turkey hot dogs and shrimp are not.

As with vegans, there are different kinds of vegetarians as well. Lacto vegetarians don't eat eggs or meat but do eat dairy, while ovo vegetarians don't eat dairy or meat but do eat eggs, and pescetarians allow themselves to eat fish, but no other meat. Some climate advocates have urged people to become a "[chickentarian](#)" by eating more chicken than beef. Such a dietary change would indeed reduce greenhouse gas emissions but, as the evidence suggests, would also be a [disaster for animal welfare](#).

Why Do People Go Vegan?

While it would be a stretch to say that there are as many reasons to go vegan as there are actual vegans, people who choose to adopt a vegan diet or lifestyle have a variety of different reasons for doing so.

Animal Welfare

Many people go vegan because they [care about animals and don't want them to suffer](#). Other vegans don't have any issue with eating animals in theory, but have serious issues with the manner in which animal products are made in modern society. The overwhelming [majority of animal-based foods are produced in factory farms](#), and the [animals in factory farms experience pain](#), suffering and stress over the course of their lives. The same goes for animals used in other industries, [such as the cosmetics industry](#). As such, many people go vegan simply because on a practical level, it's difficult or impossible to know with certainty that any given animal product didn't inflict suffering on the animal in question.

Despite some nuances in their beliefs, both of these types of vegans are motivated by a concern for the wellbeing of animals.

Environmental Concerns

The research is conclusive: the production of [meat and dairy is destroying the environment](#), and many people stop eating animal products for this reason. There are a number of reasons why the meat and dairy industries are so destructive:

- **Deforestation.** The number-one driver of [deforestation around the world is beef production](#), and it's not particularly close. [Deforestation is a problem](#) for a number of reasons; in addition to disrupting ecosystems, reducing biodiversity and in some cases causing entire species to go extinct, deforestation also makes it dramatically more difficult to fight climate change; [rainforests play an indispensable role in trapping carbon](#) and reducing global temperatures.
- **Greenhouse gasses.** Although there's some dispute around the exact number, somewhere between 11 and 20 percent of all [greenhouse gasses are produced by the livestock industry](#), mostly beef and dairy production. With extremely few exceptions, [vegan and vegetarian foods emit far fewer greenhouse gasses](#) during their production than animal products.
- **Water and land conservation.** The livestock industry uses a [massive amount of water and land](#). Plants don't require nearly as many resources, and even vegan foods that are relatively resource-intensive — [such as almond milk](#) — still only require a fraction of the water and land used to produce meat and dairy.

Personal Health

In a recent study, [52 percent of young vegans](#) said that they adopted vegan diets not out of concern for the environment or animals, but rather, because they want to be healthier. While [conflicting studies proliferate in the field of nutrition](#), plenty of research does show a link between [eating more fruits and vegetables and good health](#). In addition, several studies have shown that a vegan diet can have promising [results for improving heart health and avoiding or combatting Type 2 diabetes](#).

Money

Don't let the price of Impossible Burgers fool you: veganism is one of the cheapest diets out there, provided you aren't subsisting solely on high-end imitation meat.

A 2021 Oxford study found that [vegan diets are more affordable](#) than any of the alternatives, and that going vegan can reduce one's food costs by up to a third, while a later study found that [low-fat vegan diets are around 16 percent cheaper](#) than omnivorous ones.

What Challenges Do Vegans Face in Today's Society?

It's easier than ever to be a vegan, but that doesn't mean it's effortless. The U.S. food system is based primarily on animal agriculture — in fact, most [cropland in this country is used for growing animal feed \(and ethanol\)](#) rather than crops for people.

This creates many obstacles for vegans and anyone else looking to eat more plants instead of meat.

- **Getting along with family.** Food isn't just nutrition and sustenance; it's also how families celebrate and honor their cultural traditions. While some cultures and communities already eat mostly vegetarian, others make meat the centerpiece for holidays or festive occasions. Of course, there are plenty of creative vegan alternatives for just about every food imaginable, but asking your family to change their favorite inherited recipe can make for contentious conversations at the holiday table.
- **Lack of dining options.** While vegan menu items have become much more common over the last decade, being a vegan still usually means having fewer options when eating out. Depending on where you live, finding restaurants with vegan dishes might require some legwork.
- **Time investment.** Though there are always plenty of vegan junk foods around, many vegans (like anyone else) would like to be healthy as well, and that requires learning a bit about nutrition. Discovering which vegan meals you prefer can take some trial and error, as does [ensuring you get your B12](#). Plus, learning which foods [sneakily contain animal products](#) might also require some research.
- **Urge to eat animal products.** Being a strict vegan means that you don't eat animal products. It doesn't mean you don't crave animal products, and while there's a nearly-endless supply of delicious vegan dishes, vegans are still human, and are susceptible to temptation the same as everyone else.

How Do I Start Eating More Plants?

If you're thinking about going vegan, there are a few key tips that might make your transition easier.

- **Change your diet gradually.** Depending on who you are, eliminating all animal products from your diet can be a significant shock to your system, so it's better to [make the transition to veganism slowly](#). You could eliminate one animal product from your diet every week, for example, or start by being vegan one day a week and gradually increase it. Eating more plants is a marathon, not a sprint, and a slow transition can make it easier to stick with any dietary change in the long-term.
- **Connect with a local or online vegan community.** Whether it's by sharing vegan recipes and restaurants, learning tips and tricks or even sharing food by attending potlucks, your local community is an excellent resource. If you want to eat a more plant-forward diet, many vegans will be more than happy to help you on your journey.
- **Subscribe to a meal subscription kit.** This can be a bit pricey, but companies like Purple Carrot, Thistle, Hungryroot and many others will deliver vegan meals, premade or otherwise, to your door. Even if you can't afford such a service in the long term, signing up for a trial or short-term membership can be a great way to try vegan dishes, so you can replicate them at home on the cheap.

The Bottom Line

Veganism may seem daunting or complicated, but it doesn't have to be, and it also doesn't have to be all or nothing. For anyone who wants to eat less meat and more plants, there's [no shortage of guides and advice](#) to help you make the transition.