



Vegetarian physician debunks dietary myths

This month at the Vegetarian Society of Hawaii meeting, Dr. Michael Klaper spoke on "Vegetarian Nutrition: Reality Check." This provocative title from a highly respected Maui physician and promoter of the vegetarian diet drew a crowd of more than 400.

Klaper was not there to knock the vegetarian diet, but rather to challenge "veggie dogma" -- that vegetarian diets are always healthy. Klaper continued to promote a diet with no animal foods but stressed that like any diet, unless designed right, it can lead to health problems.

A summary of his points:

All vegans and vegetarians are lean. Not true. A lack of exercise and a diet high in sugar and fat can lead to creeping weight gain and obesity in vegetarians just like everyone else.

Carbohydrates don't cause weight gain. Wrong! Klaper said excessive carbohydrate -- especially from "white foods" such as sugar, flour, rice and pasta -- can lead to weight gain, increased blood cholesterol and, potentially, increased risk of diabetes -- vegetarian or not.

Vitamin B-12 is not a prob-

lem for vegans. Definitely untrue! Vegetarians should choose B-12-fortified products regularly or take B-12 supplements.

Minerals such as zinc, magnesium, copper, manganese and selenium are abundant in plant foods. Though some plant foods are high in these minerals, their high-fiber content and other compounds can greatly reduce absorption. The Recommended Dietary Allowance for iron is about 80 percent greater for adult vegetarians.

Eat enough calories and you will get enough protein. This only works with a proper balance of foods. Klaper has found low blood levels of essential amino acids in some vegans.

Long-chain omega-3 fatty acids are easy to synthesize from flax and other plant oils. Research shows that this is not true. Klaper recommended supplements of algae oils high in docosahexaenoic acid, one of the beneficial omega-3 fatty acids found in fish oils.

Since vegans don't consume cholesterol, they will have low blood cholesterol. Klaper has seen blood cholesterol levels creep up in some of his long-term

vegan patients.

Vegans don't get high blood pressure or heart disease. Though their risk is lower, vegans do get heart disease. It is still necessary to exercise, not smoke, control salt intake and possibly take vitamin B-6, B-12 and folate supplements.

Vegans don't get osteoporosis. A multitude of factors are associated with osteoporosis. A vegan diet does not guarantee immunity.

Fruitarians are the healthiest vegans. Those who eat primarily fruit get too little protein and often develop dental problems due to the high sugar and acid content of fruits.

Vegans and vegetarians outlive meat eaters by many years. Klaper cited a number of studies that indicate there is likely no difference.

Klaper finished by stressing that for good health, consuming a good balance of essential nutrients is more important than what the diet excludes. He concluded, "The best reason to eat vegetarian is that peace begins in the kitchen."

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