

## Digging A Vegetarian Diet

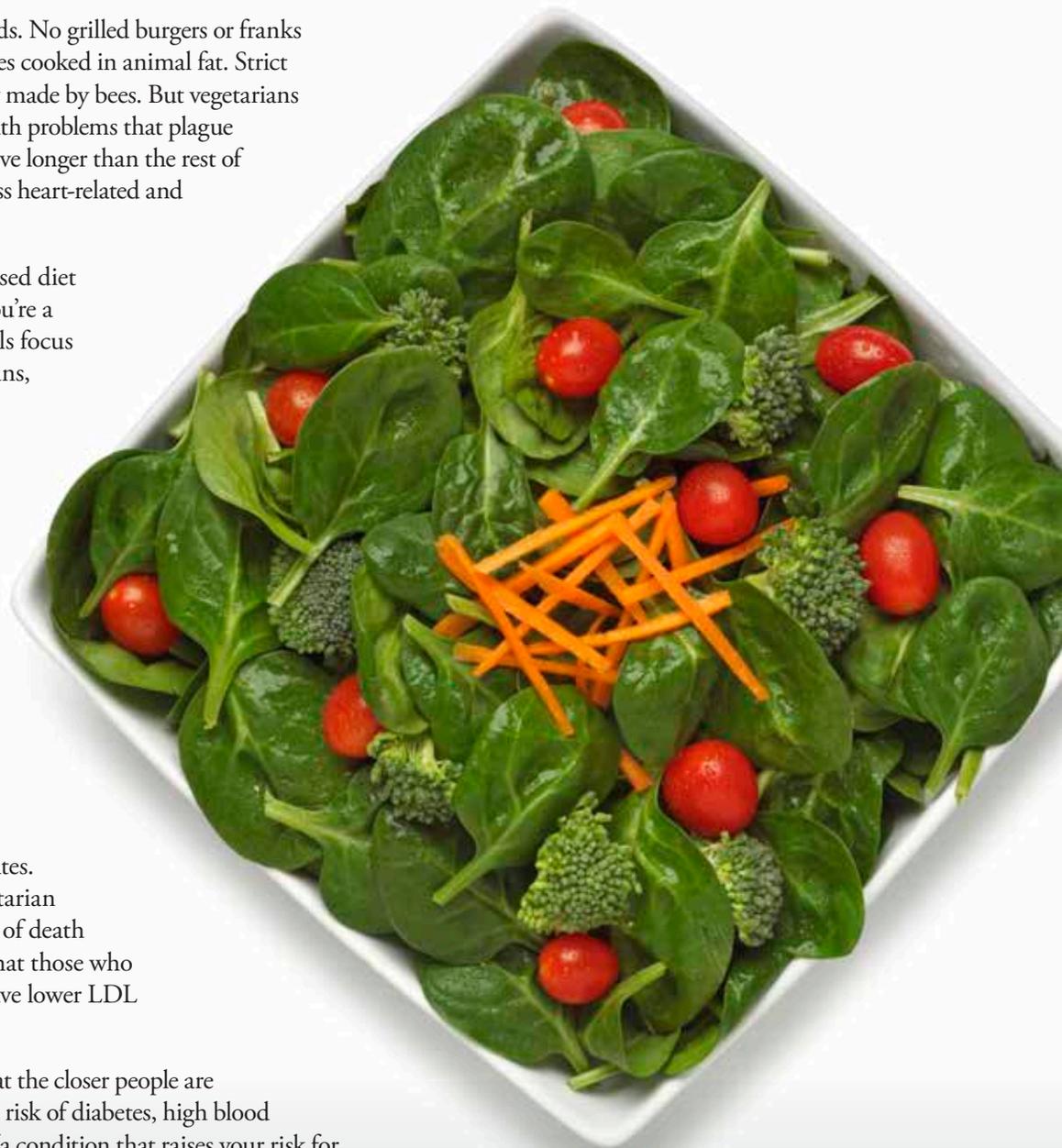
Vegetarians miss out on lots of foods. No grilled burgers or franks at picnics. No holiday turkey or fries cooked in animal fat. Strict vegetarians may even forego honey made by bees. But vegetarians also tend to miss out on major health problems that plague many Americans. They generally live longer than the rest of us, and they're more likely to bypass heart-related and other ailments.

The fact is, eating a more plant-based diet can boost your health, whether you're a vegetarian or not. Vegetarian meals focus on fruits and vegetables, dried beans, whole grains, seeds and nuts. By some estimates, about 2% of the U.S. adult population follows this type of diet.

### **The Delicious Benefits Of A Vegetarian Diet**

Vegetarian diets tend to have fewer calories, lower levels of saturated fat and cholesterol, and more fiber, potassium and vitamin C than other eating patterns. Vegetarians tend to weigh less than meat-eaters, and to have lower cancer rates. Evidence also suggests that a vegetarian diet is associated with a lower risk of death from certain heart diseases, and that those who follow a vegetarian diet tend to have lower LDL "bad" cholesterol levels.

To date, researchers have found that the closer people are to being vegetarian, the lower their risk of diabetes, high blood pressure and metabolic syndrome (a condition that raises your risk for heart disease and stroke).



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Experts generally agree that vegetarians who eat a wide variety of foods can readily meet all their body's needs for nutrients. "At any stage of life, you should be able to eat a healthy diet by consuming vegetarian foods. But it does take a little planning," says Rachel Fisher, a registered dietitian involved in nutrition research at the National Institutes of Health.

Vegetarians need to be sure they take in enough iron, calcium, zinc and vitamin B12. Studies show that most vegetarians do get enough, in part because so many cereals, breads and other foods are fortified with these nutrients. "Vegans in particular need to be certain to get enough vitamin B12 and omega-3 fatty acids," says Fisher. Omega-3—found in fish, flax seed, walnuts and canola oil—is important for heart health and vision.

Some vegetarians take dietary supplements to make sure they're getting everything they need. It's a good idea to talk to a registered dietitian or a health professional if you're a vegetarian or thinking of becoming one. Whether you're a vegetarian or not, you can ultimately benefit from the high fiber, low fat and rich nutrients of a vegetarian diet.



## Tips For A Vegetarian Diet

- Meet protein needs by eating a variety of nuts, eggs or dairy foods.
- Snack on unsalted nuts and use them in salads or main dishes.
- Vitamin B12 is naturally found only in animal products. Choose fortified foods such as cereals or soy products, or take a vitamin B12 supplement if you don't eat animal products.
- Get calcium from dairy products and calcium-fortified soy milk, breakfast cereals or orange juice.
- Beans and peas have many nutrients and are recommended for everyone, vegetarians and non-vegetarians alike.
- Try using a variety of spices and herbs to make things interesting.
- Don't overcook your vegetables, or they might lose some of their valuable nutrients.