

Dr. Mark Lohmann supervises projects at the BfR that analyse the German population's attitudes and values towards a vegan diet.



“Vegans have a conscious approach to their diet”

Mr. Lohmann, a complete change of diet sounds like a serious step that requires some time to think it over. Does that also apply to switching to a vegan diet?

Those people who are considering going vegan often have a basic ethical motivation. Our studies show other influencing factors that support changing to a vegan diet. Almost three quarters of vegan respondents had already been on a vegetarian diet. This clearly supports the decision for a vegan lifestyle – which is plausible, as vegetarians have already extensively adjusted their diet and have given up meat. According to the majority of statements, documentaries on conventional livestock farming were the most important trigger for changing

the diet. These reports are shocking. The ethical decision is not based on direct, personal experience, but rather on animal suffering conveyed by the media.

Veganism and a mixed-food diet – there are two camps behind this which perceive the benefits of their diets differently, aren't there?

People following a vegan diet see numerous health benefits from their diet, from general health to positive effects on performance and appearance through to a reduced risk of future diseases. Furthermore, they believe that they contribute to animal welfare and that their type of diet has a positive impact on the climate and environment. People who also eat animal

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products appreciate that their choice of meals contains variety and balance, and that it contains all the necessary nutrients.

And what about the disadvantages?

A drawback for vegans is practical feasibility in everyday life – because some foods are only available on a limited basis. They also consider having to ensure that the intake of nutrients is sufficient as a disadvantage. What's more, there is the more particular problem of social pressure that some feel when they get into discussions and conflicts with their social environment because of their diet. Interestingly, those following a mixed diet do not attribute much significance to the obvious advantage of easier food choice and nutrient supply. Many of them say that they eat an unbalanced diet. Negative health effects and unhealthy ingredients are other mentioned issues.

What differences between dietary groups do you see in your studies?

Notably that significantly more vegans indicate that they take food supplements than those following a mixed diet. Apart from that, the groups are similar in their health-related behaviour. For example, they are on a par when it comes to everyday exercise and alcohol consumption; only with regard to smoking do the mixed-diet group reach for cigarettes more often. Other than that, vegans subjectively evaluate their health status as “very good” more often and the majority believe that their dietary change has brought them health benefits. At the same time, they approach their diet more consciously than the mixed-diet group. This fits the bill because they state that they are much more likely to actively seek information about nutrition, notably on the internet.

Speaking of which, the BfR has analysed more than 1,000 entries on social media, forums and blogs, where people talk about a vegan diet. What sentiment can be observed there?

Veganism is overwhelmingly positively discussed on the internet, although this does depend on the channel. 92 % of the entries analysed drew a favourable picture. Most of the critical comments can be found on Twitter, where remarks are still more likely to be positive (42 %) than negative (30 %). Veganism is not hailed without question – even 40 % of neutral and positive entries show a recognisable risk awareness. Possible nutrient deficiencies and how to prevent them are topics that are discussed. A considerable number of people, that consider their diet to be good, are therefore both critical and reflective about the associated risks.

Nutrient deficiency is the major topic when it comes to veganism. Even if vegans are aware of it, how can it be addressed, for example, in a circle of friends – without polarising?

By changing their diet, vegans have experienced overwhelmingly positive health effects. When veganism is generally communicated as being unhealthy, this contradicts their experience. To maintain a dialogue, you should communicate in a way that is pro-vegan or at least neutral. Otherwise, you risk being unheard. Stigmatisation is – of course – taboo.

The BfR conveys information about health risks and also addresses vegans. Where are the problem areas?

The majority of vegans are aware of the risks associated with their specific diet. However, from their perspective, a balanced diet and vitamin B₁₂ supplementation fully address these risks. They are uncertain when it comes to health risks during pregnancy and for children. However, our investigation shows that many vegans believe that, both a vegan diet during pregnancy and a vegan diet for infants or young children is not associated with any significant health risk. They consider regular medical examinations and taking food supplements to be effective preventive measures, but put this into practice with children only to a small extent. These findings are important for addressing the issue of pregnancy and the diet of infants, children and adolescents in particular, and for conveying specific recommendations for action. ■