

Thinkin' Vegan?

By Michael Snyder, MD, Teton Valley Health Care

First, I would like to express my thanks for the warm welcome my family and I have received by those who live here in the Teton Valley. We are very excited as we begin a new chapter in our lives as I take up duties at Driggs and Victor Health Clinics and Teton Valley Hospital.

Americans are facing a health care crisis. We are faced with escalating costs of doctor's visits, hospitalization, medications and insurance with less coverage. There is a huge debate going on in Washington and around the country about what course to take.

There are many nonpolitical approaches we can consider to lessen the negative impact of this ongoing crisis. One significant approach would be the prevention of health problems that can lead to chronic diseases or even death. As a physician, I encounter questions from many patients about diet and nutrition. Interest continues to grow in a vegan diet with new research shedding light on short- and long-term benefits.

According to a well-received study on NEWSTART, a program sponsored by The Seventh Day Adventist, adhering to a vegan lifestyle change program could be an option for people to consider. A large portion of the program revolves around nutrition and exercise. Anybody could do it, it costs very little compared to what a family spends on healthcare, and it is something that is easily introduced into anyone's lifestyle. The hardest part may be learning to cook differently than how you cook now. There is no calorie counting, no carb counting if you are diabetic, no weigh-ins, no gym memberships. This program can introduce you to the increasingly popular vegetarian lifestyle. The secret to success is a good vegan cookbook to get started.

Research is continuing to reveal that Vegetarian and Mediterranean lifestyles are far healthier than the current American lifestyle. We in the USA have become increasingly sedentary and are eating increasingly more and more processed diet with higher and higher refined carbohydrate and fat contents. Studies that have been going on for over 30 years in the Loma Linda region of California are revealing that people who eat vegetarian live longer by over 6 years with a fraction, 24-56% the rates of lifestyle diseases including coronary artery disease, diabetes type 2, hypertension, obesity, constipation, certain arthritic conditions and some forms of cancer, such as prostate, breast and colon cancers. Now, it should be noted that Loma Linda has been named one of the top 3 healthiest cities in the world. I believe that this is due to the high number of people who live by principles very similar to NEWSTART. Also, NEWSTART is the only program recognized by the American Diabetes Association that is known to be able to reverse diabetes, as quoted in ADA Newsletter, Jan/Feb 2004.

A study published in 1977 shows that people that switch from the Standard American Diet to the Vegan diet show an average of over 100 points reduction in cholesterol. A vegan diet is high in fiber, complex carbohydrates and is low in fat while normalizing the protein intake. The first

question I usually get while discussing this program is “Where do you get your protein?” My response is simple, “the problem is not whether or not I get enough protein, but rather that Americans may be getting far too much protein.” Not only are we getting far too much protein in our diets, but we also need to begin exercising. NEWSTART recommends about 10,000 steps daily or 20 minutes of aerobic exercise everyday with some light weight lifting or resistance work out 2 or 3 times weekly. It is well known that exercise helps us sleep better, lowers blood pressure, improves depression, improves cardiovascular health, increases strength, and helps live longer, happier lives. We also want to make sure we are drinking plenty of water about 8 glasses per day. We should avoid things that are harmful for our bodies such as cigarettes, drugs and alcohol and use things that are good for us in moderation. We should exercise in the fresh air and sunlight as often as possible. We all need rest and 7-8 hours of sleep nightly seems to be the best recommendation for optimal health.

If Americans were to take up this type of lifestyle change, estimates by some experts predict that we would have approximately 3 to 7% of the current lifestyle disease rates. This would certainly impact the debate on healthcare in America.

Whether the choice is to "go vegan" or simply to move our diet more in the vegan direction and adding exercise, there is no doubt in my mind that we can do a lot more to mitigate health care expenses by taking better care of ourselves.

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