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BY Hillari Dowdle

beat TRAP THE TRAP

5 veg weight-gain pitfalls,
and how to avoid them

When you announced to the world, “I’m going vegetarian!” chances are that someone, somewhere was worried you’d waste away to nothing.

Of course, that’s not true. Not only can you meet your calorie needs on a vegetarian diet, you can easily exceed them. While in theory a vegetarian diet is the most healthful on the planet, in practice it sometimes leaves much to be desired in terms of weight management and vibrant good health.

In the spirit of the New Year—our resolutions for weight loss and healthful eating still alive and kickin’—we asked several savvy, veg-friendly chefs and nutritionists to help spot common vegetarian diet traps, and suggest ways to not fall into them.

ILLUSTRATION BY Juliette Borda

TRAP #1 Negative Thinking

“A vegetarian diet is exciting, but when people focus on what they’re not doing anymore, they’re missing out on the adventure of it,” says Christina Pirello, host of the PBS series *Christina Cooks*, and author of *This Crazy Vegan Life*. “And they can start to lose nutrition if they’re focusing on just lopping things out without replacing them with something healthful.”

Focusing so intently on what you’re cutting out of your diet that you stop thinking about what you’re putting into it is possibly the most basic vegetarian pitfall of all. When meat (or eggs, or dairy, or all of the above) drops out, it can be easy to assume that all other foods are A-OK. Unfrosted Pop-Tarts, Oreos, Fritos—all these are vegetarian, and all are nutritional black holes just the same. “You can stick to everything vegetarian or vegan, and still be eating way too many processed foods,” Pirello says.

Dawn Jackson Blatner, RD, author of *The Flexitarian Diet: The Mostly Vegetarian Way to Lose Weight, Be Healthier, Prevent Disease, and Add Years to Your Life*, has a name for victims of this trap: “I call them the ‘beige vegetarians,’” she says. “They’ll be reading labels like crazy to make sure there’s no meat in their diet, but they’ll have no fruits or vegetables on their plates.”

With a willingness to experiment and a little kitchen inspiration [see Trap #5, Clueless about Cooking, p. 69], a whole new world of textures, flavors, and energy-boosting phytonutrients can be yours. “I encourage people to make a list of foods they love, focus on the vegetables there, and then start playing around with one new seasonal veggie every week,” says Jackie Newgent, RD, author of *Big Green*



KEEP YOUR EYES WIDE
OPEN WHEN YOU EAT.

Cookbook: Hundreds of Planet-Pleasing Recipes & Tips for a Luscious, Low-Carbon Lifestyle. “When you’re playing with just one ingredient, it gives you a focus. You can expand your eating plan one vegetable at a time.”

Taking this addition approach, make your local farmers’ market an idea laboratory. “A vegetarian should always be eating a variety of fresh foods, and the ‘green’ market is a great place to find inspiration,” says Myra Kornfeld, a culinary instructor at the Natural Gourmet Institute of Culinary Arts in New York, and author of *The Healthy Hedonist Holidays: A Year of Multicultural, Vegetarian-Friendly Holiday Feasts*. “You’ll encounter purslane, wild spinach, escarole, chicory ... these are the kinds of things that people overlook, but they’re delicious once you get to know them.”

Balance your diet, and your plate, with more vegetables, and expect to feel better and start shedding pounds.

TRAP #2 Subpar Carbs

Vegetarians heaved a collective sigh of relief when the benefits of a low-carb diet started getting debunked. Pasta, that old friend, was back on the menu! And with it came lots of refined carbohydrates. For many, that added up to creeping weight gain.

Pirello—a confessed pasta fan—

and that is where the fiber and nutrition are,” explains Blatner. “When you’re eating refined grains, there’s a low satiety factor—it’s hard to get full, which can lead to overeating.”

The solution is simple: switch to whole-wheat pastas, and explore the world of whole grains, which come with filling fiber and nutrition intact. “A healthy vegetarian will look at brown rice, quinoa, and barley,” Pirello says. “These complex carbohydrates break apart slowly in the body—they set you on simmer, so you won’t be hungry as quickly.”

Keep good old semolina pasta on the menu, if you like, but go easy. Limit the serving size to ½ cup—no more than 25 percent of your plate—and load up your pasta primavera with extra broccoli, carrots, tomatoes, eggplant, and onions.

TRAP #3 Mock Meat Overload

It’s easy to replace all those hot dogs, hamburgers, bologna slices, and chicken wings you’ve cut from your diet ... with meatless hot dogs, hamburgers, bologna slices, and chicken wings. But going overboard on these microwavable replacements is simply faux-meat folly.

“The jury is out on whether they are really healthier for you,” says Pirello. “Yes, there is less saturated fat, but there

with them is that they are superconvenient. It’s so easy to microwave plateful after plateful of nuggets and overdo it. You’ll get more protein than you really need, and way too much salt. And you may be missing out on all the phytonutrients that come with eating whole foods.”

One more thing: if you’re relying on fake meat for dinner every night, you may very well be getting too much soy—especially if you’re pouring soymilk on your breakfast cereal, snacking on edamame, and eating a tempeh burger for lunch. “Soy is great, but nobody gets healthy focusing on one food,” says Blatner. “You want to rely on beans for protein, but there are lots of beans out there, and each has its unique nutritional qualities. Instead of grabbing a preformed patty, try adding white beans with tomato and basil to a whole-grain pita, or tossing some garbanzos into a stir-fry, or heating up some lentil soup. Every legume will bring a different set of phytochemicals and micronutrients to the table.”

TRAP #4 No Game Plan

Even if you know what’s best for you, it’s easy to fall into the habit of grabbing whatever’s handy. Too often, that means calorie-dense cheese and starch. If you

What packs 100 (or so) calories?

1 oz. American cheese: 94 | ½ Pop-Tart: 103 | 15 cups spinach leaves: 104
50 baby zucchini: 100 | 5 steak-cut French fries: 101 | 15 almonds: 104

recommends proceeding with caution. “It takes the body 20 minutes to process that it’s getting full, but you can knock back a huge plate of pasta in 10 minutes,” she says. “Refined carbs go down so fast and so easy.”

So, what’s wrong with cultivating a refined palate? “When you refine grains, you remove two-thirds of the plant—you take away the bran and the germ,

can also be lots of sodium, preservatives, hydrogenated fat, and fractionalized soy protein.”

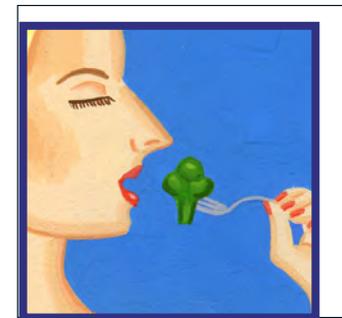
The key here is moderation—and vigilant label reading. Look for varieties that include whole grains and beans (as some do). “They’re nice transitional foods,” says Reed Mangels, PhD, RD, nutrition adviser for the Vegetarian Resource Group. “The biggest problem

eat out a lot, you’re especially prey to a reliance on pound-packing foods. “When you go vegetarian, it pays to do a little restaurant sleuthing, so you’re not falling back on cheese pizza and French fries,” says Tara Gidus, RD, aka the Diet Diva. She advises getting to know the chefs at your regular haunts, and asking politely for more meatless options. “You won’t be the first,” she says.

| slimming tips |

COMBINE PROTEIN WITH CARBS

“People eat 2 cups of cereal out of the box, and a half-hour later they’re starving again,” says Tara Gidus, RD. “Even if you just add soymilk, it really helps.”

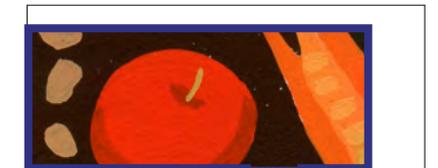


CHEW YOUR FOOD

“I try to eat slowly and deliberately,” says Myra Kornfeld. “That act alone will get me in touch with my body enough to keep me from overeating.”

JOURNAL EVERY MORSEL

“If you’re standing in front of the fridge with a spoon,” says Reed Mangels, PhD, RD, “you’ll be less likely to use it if you know you have to write down everything you put in your mouth with it.”



Apply the same advance work to the meals you cook at home. One of the best ways to lose weight and feel energized, says Newgent, is to plan for a balanced plate: fill half with vegetables or fruits, one-quarter with whole grains, and one-quarter with protein-rich foods, such as beans, whole soy foods, or nuts.

If you haven’t quite gotten the knack of eating this way, don’t worry. All it takes is a little practice. If you’re new to the game, start out planning a week’s worth of menus—you don’t have to execute the plan exactly, but you’ll get a good idea of what you need to eat and how to shop for it. Once you’ve grasped that, and mastered the art of the balanced plate, you can start to loosen up a bit. “With planning, less is more, but you do want to ballpark it,” says Blatner. “Start each week with just two or three ideas for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Go to the store with those ideas in mind, and be open to what’s beautiful, in season, and fresh.”

One sweet side to planning: when you start to replace French fries with baby zucchini, you get to add a whole lot more to your plate. [See What Packs 100 (or So) Calories? on p. 68.]

TRAP #5 Clueless about Cooking

Bar none, the single most important thing you can do for your diet is to get into the kitchen and start cooking your own food. “People say they are so busy that they don’t have time to cook,” muses Pirello. “In other cultures, dinner is the entire point. You make an evening out of it. Here, we have choke it down, and do something else.”

Pirello blames the “dinner-in-a-bucket syndrome” on a cultural disconnect—with a world of convenience foods, we’ve lost the art of cooking. It’s time to revive that art, she says, especially if you’re a vegetarian. “When you don’t have the basic skills to put a meal together, you’re at the mercy of whatever is out there—it’s how you end up every night saying, ‘Oh, it’s 7 o’clock, I’ll just do pasta again,’” she says. “You need to know how to braise, how to roast, how to stew; you need basic knife skills. We’re not splitting the atom here.”

Still, if the kitchen seems like foreign territory, sign up for a cooking class or two, says Kornfeld. Watch YouTube videos, thumb through cookbooks, read food magazines (such as this one), and experiment.

You’ll boost your odds of culinary success if you set up a go-to pantry. Pirello advises having the following on hand: sea salt, black pepper, extra virgin olive oil, and a few types of whole grains (millet, brown rice, amaranth, quinoa). Stock up on dried beans (black, white, pinto, garbanzo), plus a couple of canned varieties for on-the-spot cooking. Buy a few vinegars (white, balsamic, red wine). Invest in a great knife. (“Go to a kitchen store, and hold every chef’s knife in your hand,” says Pirello. “When you find the right one, you’ll just know it—I swear.”)

And don’t neglect the spice rack. Keep a few key spices on hand, and you can turn whatever’s in season into a feast, says Kornfeld: “Combine cumin, ginger, chili powder, and oregano, and you can give dishes a Mexican flavor profile. Use cumin, coriander, ginger, garlic, and turmeric, and you’ve got Indian. Mix fennel, white wine, and a few of the green herbs, and you’ll have Provençal.”

What effort you do make will be amply rewarded with greater vitality and a naturally trim waistline. “Cooking is more work—it just is,” Pirello says. “But if you’re not willing to work for your health, what *are* you willing to work for?”