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## Vegan vs non-vegan

The argument continues... this time it's between Canadian raw vegan chef Lisa Pitman and nutritionist Swarupa Kakani, who is an ardent advocate of more balanced diets

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Posted On Tuesday, November 08, 2011 at 07:01:43 PM

Fresh fruits and veggies may not bring on the smiles as would a plate of mutton biriyani, but there are no prizes for guessing which is healthier. It's the reason why health-conscious people worldwide are switching to a raw plant-based diet to prevent obesity and lifestyle diseases. But is it advisable to leave out entire food groups such as dairy and lean meat and worse, risk eating uncooked food? Taking this debate forward is noted Canadian raw vegan chef Lisa Pitman who is in the city to talk about the healing power of plants and Swarupa Kakani, chief nutritionist at Sagar Hospitals, who is an advocate of a balanced diet that includes a variety of foods.

## Raw vegan vs non-vegan food

**Lisa:** Eating a plant-based diet means getting all the benefits of vitamins, minerals and fibre and without any of the saturated fats or cholesterol found in animal foods. Research has shown that a plant-based, whole foods diet helps prevent and even reverse heart disease, diabetes, obesity and other diseases.

Raw plant foods are packed with powerful phytochemicals. Some of their health-promoting properties are actually damaged when cooked. So, it is important to include a big portion of raw fruits and vegetables in your diet to ensure you're getting everything you need. One of the greatest benefits of eating a diet rich in fresh, raw foods is that there is a lot less room for the processed, refined foods that are harmful to our health. With raw foods, the flavours are vibrant and every bite

## Promotes good health.

**Swarupa:** It is not possible to eat only raw food always since many foods need to be cooked for proper digestion. Of course, a plant-based diet offers a lot of benefits with vitamins and minerals. A well-balanced diet means eating the right amount of food to supply the body with the energy it needs to function properly and includes proper calorie, nutrient dense foods such as fruits, vegetables, whole grains and lean proteins. Eating non-vegetarian food does not mean there are no vegetables in the diet. You need to balance out all the food items in the diet including 3-5 servings of vegetables and 2-4 servings of fruits per day.

## Totally vegan Vs a healthy food combination

**Lisa:** Switching from a non-vegan diet to a vegan diet will definitely affect your health – in the best possible way! If you're eating a variety of whole, plant-based foods, you will get all the nutrients your body needs.

The only nutrient you need to supplement is Vitamin B12. This vitamin is produced by bacteria and since food is sanitised to a high degree, many people may need to supplement their diet with a reliable source of Vitamin B12.

I think the best way for people to see the healing power of food is to experience it. What you can learn from eating a well-balanced, plant-based, whole food diet for a month cannot be replaced by any statistic or fact I can share!

Everyone I know who has given veganism a try, has been shocked by the increase in energy and vitality that they feel. The only regret I've ever heard is that they wish they had tried it sooner.

**Swarupa:** Muslims and Christians who eat non-vegetarian foods almost on a daily basis would

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Page 1 of 34 »

definitely balk when you tell them to go veg. Though it is advisable to take vegetarian more often than non-vegetarian, eating lean bird meat and eggs a couple of times a week is in no way harmful. Of course, eating red meat like pork, beef, lamb, mutton etc can be avoided due to the high fat and cholesterol levels present in them. Nowadays, unfertilised eggs have become popular for vegetarians.

### **Fresh and raw Vs cooked food**

**Lisa:** I would recommend choosing fresh, organic food from reliable suppliers. Cleaning produce before using it, and being vigilant about the presence of bugs, moulds etc. would help too. The most important thing is to eat a well-balanced, plant-based diet. Find food from sources you trust and eat raw when you can. Moreover, there are some nutrients that are better absorbed by our body when foods have been cooked. Lycopene is a great example though this is an exception as most vitamins and minerals are more bio-available in raw foods. But this is why I promote balance. A wonderful tomato sauce tossed with raw zucchini noodles gives you the best of both.

**Swarupa:** It is the most frequently asked question when we tell people to include salads in their diet. I would recommend them to make salads at home. There is such a smorgasbord to choose from including coloured capsicums, sprouts, corn, cabbage, radishes and the ever popular cucumber, carrots and tomatoes. Washing thoroughly before eating is the best solution to the problem. Time certainly shouldn't be a constraint because all you have to do is WASH, CHOP, EAT. But it is not possible to eat raw food all the time. Blanching is a good option at that time. Using the vegetable and the lentil stock to cook dishes is the best way to retain water soluble vitamins and minerals. A lot of people have a misconception that throwing away the water after boiling rice takes away the starch but the truth is that all you are eating is starch. Steam or pressure cook your cereals, pulses and vegetables and never throw away the stock.

### **Protein overload Vs calcium deficiency**

**Lisa:** There is a widespread belief that eating only raw vegan food will cause deficiencies - but it's simply not true. Did you know that countries that consume cow's milk the most also have the highest incidence of osteoporosis?

There are many plant foods rich in calcium – green vegetables and nuts, for example. Sesame seeds have 10 times as much calcium as the same amount of cow's milk. And unlike cow's milk, this calcium comes without the unhealthy animal fats and cholesterol!

This is also true of protein. A diet comprised of meat and dairy products actually overloads the body with too much protein – which has been linked with kidney disease, cancer and osteoporosis. Eating a good mix of grains, vegetables, legumes and fruits takes care of all our protein needs.

Research represented in various studies supports a plant-based diet. The best-selling book *The China Study* presents findings from a 20-year study: the lower the consumption of animal products, the lower the incidence of chronic diseases. Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine, a non-profit focused on preventive medicine and high quality research, recommends a low-fat, vegan diet as the healthiest diet.

These are just two examples. Research around the world is finding direct links between the consumption of animal products and diseases like cancer, hypertension and diabetes, among others.

As a child, I often got sick. It took a lot of tests to determine that the culprit was animal products. I decided to eat vegan and the difference it made was amazing. Immediately, my stomach aches stopped and I was full of energy. My mom went vegan when she turned 50. At the time she was suffering from severe asthma and diabetes. Changing her diet changed her life. She is no longer on any medication, has reversed her diabetes and completed two 5-km races with me this year. I find the research studies encouraging, but I've seen first hand the power of plants!

**Swarupa:** No doubt, plant-based and whole grains are healthy since they are rich in fibre, vitamins and minerals, as suggested by research but to completely leave out animal foods is not the answer. What about deficiency? Milk products are a very good source of calcium and protein. It is also better absorbed by the body when compared to the plant counterparts. People who are lactose intolerant are more likely to tolerate curd/yoghurt which not only have the same nutrients as milk and but also the added advantage of being pro-biotic. Most instances of B12 deficiency also happens due to a vegetarian diet since vitamin B 12 is only present in animal sources. A friend of mine is allergic to all pulses so for her animal source would be the only option.

Vegetarians on an average consume less protein – as low as 20-30 gm, whereas the ideal requirement is about 50-60 gm per day. Nuts are protein rich, but we have to think from a consumer's point of view too. How many can actually afford to have nuts every day, and even if they do, they are rich in fat which is not suitable for obese people. In india, homes in the rural area have cows, so cow's milk is definitely cost-effective too. When it comes to legumes, the protein is not 100 per cent bio available.

There is nothing wrong in eating non-veg as well if you are doing so in a proper manner: eating chicken without skin, including fish and eggs, cooking with less oil and baking, grilling, boiling, steaming, roasting instead of frying. A non-vegetarian diet provides high protein with all essential amino acids which the body needs. Fish is a high-protein, low-fat food that provides a range of health benefits. White-fleshed fish, in particular, is lower in fat than any other source of animal protein, and oily fish are high in Omega-3 fatty acids, or the "good" fats. These help maintain cardiovascular health, are important for prenatal and postnatal neurological development and may reduce tissue inflammation and alleviate the symptoms of rheumatoid arthritis.

(Lisa Pitman will give a talk and demonstration on The Healing Power of Plants and Eating without Heating ([www.sharan-india.org](http://www.sharan-india.org)) on Nov 11 and 13 at In the Pink Organic Bazaar & Restaurant, 93, 6th Cross, N. S. Palya, Dollars Colony, BTM Layout)



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