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The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) report that Americans eat an average of 58 pounds of beef, 93 pounds of chicken, and 52 pounds of pork, per person, per year. Vegetarians, about 3.3% of the US adult population and 4% of the US youth population, do not eat meat (including poultry and seafood). In their Dietary Guidelines for Americans 2015-2020, the USDA and the US Department of Health and Human Services outline three "healthy eating patterns" or "balanced diets" - two include meat, one is vegetarian.

Many proponents of vegetarianism say that eating meat harms health, wastes resources, causes deforestation, and creates pollution. They often argue that killing animals for food is cruel and unethical since non-animal food sources are plentiful.

Many opponents of a vegetarian diet say that meat consumption is healthful and humane, and that producing vegetables causes many of the same environmental problems as producing meat. They also argue that humans have been eating and enjoying meat for 2.3 million years. [Read more background...](#)

For the purposes of this site a "vegetarian diet" is one that does not contain any meat (including poultry and seafood), but can contain eggs (ovo) and dairy (lacto) products, which is why the diet is sometimes called the ovo-lacto vegetarian diet. Vegans do not eat any animal products including meat, eggs, and dairy products.

Top Pro & Con Arguments

Pro 1

It is cruel and unethical to kill animals for food when vegetarian options are available. Animals are sentient beings that have emotions and social connections. Scientific studies show that cattle, pigs, chickens, and all warm-blooded animals can experience stress, pain, and fear. [100] In the United States about 35 million cows, 115 million pigs, and 9 billion birds are killed for food each year. [96] These animals should not have to die to satisfy an unnecessary dietary preference.

Con 1

Eating meat is not cruel or unethical; it is a natural part of the cycle of life. Vegetarians mistakenly elevate the value of animal life over plant life. Research shows that plants respond electrochemically to threats and may feel fear, [98] so vegetarians are also causing harm every time they kill and eat a plant. Every organism on earth dies or is killed, at some point, so others organisms can live. There is nothing wrong with this cycle; it is how nature works.



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Background of the Issue

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) report that Americans eat an average of 58 pounds of beef, 93 pounds of chicken, and 52 pounds of pork, per person, per year. [139] Vegetarians, about 3.3% of the US adult population and 4% of the US youth population, do not eat meat (including poultry and seafood). [136] [137] In their *Dietary Guidelines for Americans 2015-2020*, the USDA and the US Department of Health and Human Services outline three "healthy eating patterns" or "balanced diets" - two include meat, one is vegetarian. [138]



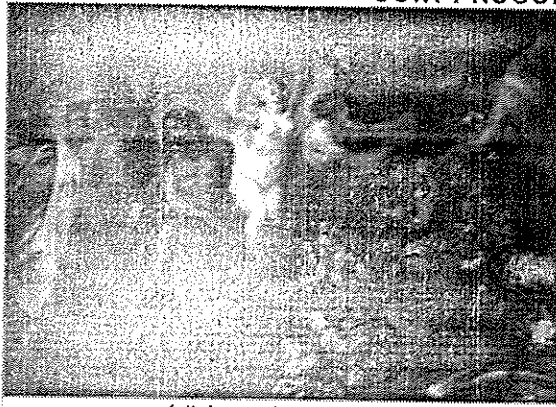
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USDA image of grass fed beef cattle at pasture.
Source: Wade Snyder, "AF-SRC Picture of the Week, November 21, 2005," www.ars.usda.gov (accessed Mar. 28, 2011)

Many proponents of vegetarianism say that eating meat harms health, wastes resources, causes deforestation, and creates pollution. They often argue that killing animals for food is cruel and unethical since non-animal food sources are plentiful.

Many opponents of a vegetarian diet say that meat consumption is healthful and humane, and that producing vegetables causes many of the same environmental problems as producing meat. They also argue that humans have been eating and enjoying meat for 2.3 million years. [14]

In Western culture vegetarianism dates back to Ancient Greece. The mathematician Pythagoras (570 BC - 495 BC)



(click to enlarge image)

Oil painting (c. 1618-30) of Pythagoras
advocating vegetarianism by Sir Peter Paul
Rubens and Frans Snyders.

Source: The Royal Collection, "Pythagoras
Advocating Vegetarianism,"
www.royalcollection.org.uk (accessed Apr. 19,
2011)

called the "Pythagorean diet" until the term vegetarian
became popular during the 1800s. [120] The philosopher Plato
(428 BC - 348 BC) described a vegetarian diet as "divinely
ordained." [70]

Other well known vegetarians include Leonardo da Vinci
(1452-1519), George Bernard Shaw (1712-1778), Leo Tolstoy
(1828-1910), Mohandas Gandhi (1869-1948), and Franz Kafka
(1883-1924). [71] [81] More recent vegetarians include César
Chávez (1927-1993), Jane Goodall, Paul McCartney, Ellen
DeGeneres, Carl Lewis, Russell Brand, Pamela Anderson, and
Dennis Kucinich (D-OH).

In 1850 the American Vegetarian Society was formed by
Reverend Sylvester Graham (1794-1851), a nutritionist and the
inventor of the Graham Cracker. The society advocated
vegetarianism and avoiding white flour to promote health and cure alcoholism and lust. [77]

In the late 1800s, a new form of Christianity developed in the United States known as Seventh-Day Adventism. The Seventh-Day Adventist Church, of which Dr. John Harvey Kellogg (1852-1953) - the inventor of corn flakes - was a member, [55] [78] preached and practiced vegetarianism as the most ethical, spiritual, and healthy diet. Adventists believe God intended humans to be stewards of the creatures of the earth, not consumers of them. [75] The health benefits of their vegetarian diet were shown in a 2001 study published in the *Archives of Internal Medicine*. [76] Many Quakers, Buddhists, Hindus, and Rastafarians also advocate vegetarianism as an extension of their belief in practicing non-violence. [83]

In 1906 Upton Sinclair published *The Jungle*, a popular book about Chicago's filthy, unhygienic meat-packing facilities and their exploited immigrant workers. The book's revelations led to a government investigation and the passage of the Meat Inspection Act and the Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906. [99]

In 1916 the USDA issued its first food guide, "Food for Young Children," which included meat and milk in one of five necessary food groups for optimal health. [69] In 1917, during World War I, the US government advocated "Meatless Tuesdays" to conserve meat for the troops. [82]

In the 1950s post war prosperity caused demand for meat to increase. With little new grassland left to support expanding livestock herds, farmers began turning to grain and soy, rather than pasture grasses, to feed their animals. By 1960 US soybean production nearly tripled that of China. [28]

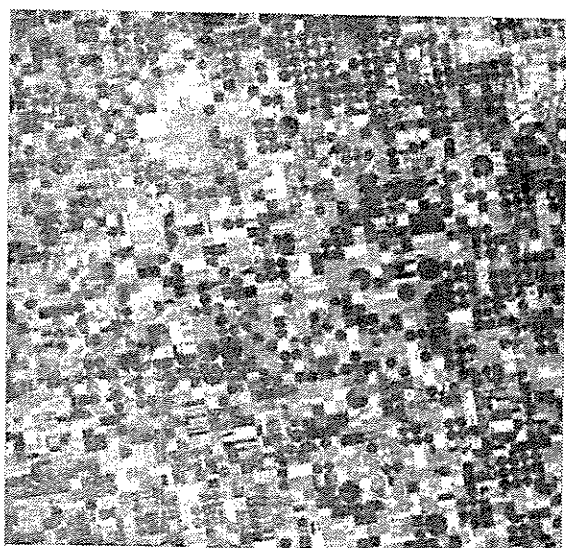
In 1958 US President Dwight Eisenhower signed the Humane

Methods of Slaughter Act (HMSA) into law under opposition from the USDA and the meat industry. The law sought to minimize the pain of animals by mandating livestock be stunned unconscious before slaughter. An exemption was made for ritual slaughter under religious law. Poultry and fur animals were (and still are as of Apr. 2013) exempt from the HMSA. [65]

In the 1970s US public interest in vegetarianism grew, fueled by books such as Frances Moore Lappe's *Diet for a Small Planet* and Peter Singer's *Animal Liberation*. In 1974, the North American Vegetarian Society was founded as was the magazine *Vegetarian Times*. [70] In 1980, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) formed to advocate for a vegan diet and an end to using animals for testing, entertainment, or clothing. As of 2013, PETA remains one of the largest animal rights organizations in the world with over 3 million members and supporters. [72]

Between 1982 and 1997, the number of animals on concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs) increased by 88%. [41] This industrialization of meat production lowered US prices and increased consumption. In 1970, Americans spent 4.2% of their income to consume 194 pounds of red meat and poultry per person. By 2005 Americans were consuming 221 pounds of red meat and poultry per person (a 12% increase) while spending 2.1% of their income on it (a 50% decrease). [32]

On Oct. 18, 1987, the American Dietetic Association (ADA) released its first position paper endorsing a vegetarian diet stating that, "appropriately planned vegetarian diets are healthful, nutritionally adequate, and provide health benefits in the prevention and treatment of certain diseases." [1]



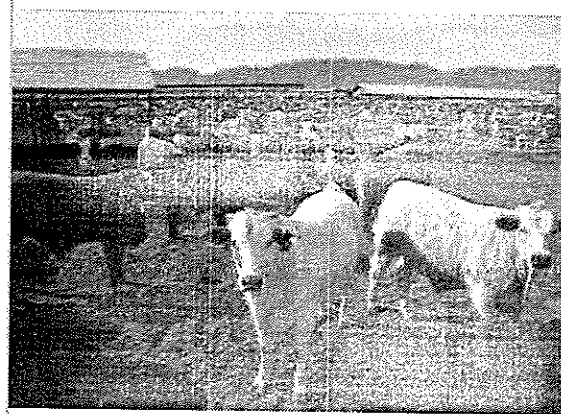
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Each circle and square is an individual corn or wheat field in Kansas on what used to be

In the early 1990s Dr. Temple Grandin devised transportation devices, stockyards, loading ramps, and restraining systems designed to minimize stress and calm animals as they are led to slaughter. [88] In 1991 Dr. Grandin's recommendations for humane animal handling and slaughter were adopted by the American Meat Institute, the oldest and largest meat and poultry trade association in the country. [91]

In Dec. 1995 the USDA stated for the first time [69] that "vegetarian diets are consistent with the dietary guidelines for Americans and can meet the recommended dietary allowances for nutrients." [68]

In 1996 the Center for Consumer Freedom was formed to fight against what it termed "self-anointed 'food police,'" and



(click to enlarge image)

Image of beef cattle in a concentrated animal feeding operation (CAFO).

Source: Jeff Vanuga, USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, "Confined Feeding Operations of Cattle," *photogallery.nrcs.usda.gov* (accessed July 8, 2013)

shortgrass prairie. This image shows that agriculture also has a major environmental

impact.

Source: NASA Earth Observatory, "Crop Circles in Kansas" earthobservatory.nasa.gov, June 24, 2001

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"animal rights misanthropes." The group lobbies for the food industry against health regulations and lawsuits, and advocates eating meat as a "personal choice." One of its main targets has been the animal rights organization PETA. [94]

On Apr. 16, 1996, the *Oprah Show* aired a debate between former rancher Howard Lyman and Dr. Gary Weber, spokesman for the National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA). After Lyman described how dead cows were ground into feed for other cows risking the spread of mad cow disease, Oprah Winfrey stated: "It has just stopped me cold from eating another burger." The show caused a fall in cattle futures on the Chicago Mercantile Exchange and prompted the NCBA to sue Oprah for "disparagement" of beef - a case they eventually lost. [79] After the Oprah controversy, the USDA implemented a ban prohibiting "the use of most mammalian protein in the manufacture of animal feed intended for cattle and other ruminants." [80]

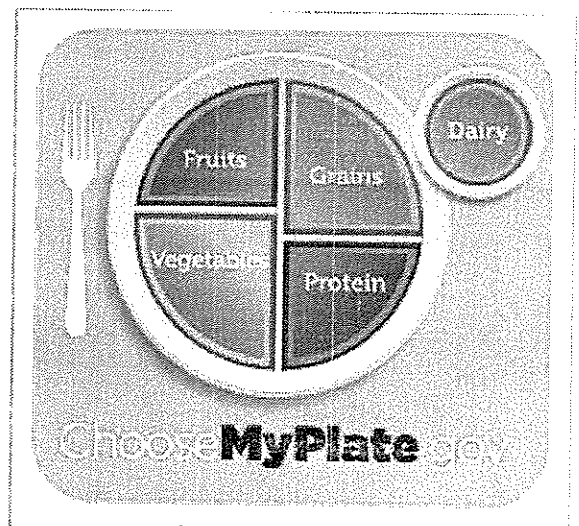
In 1999 the Weston A. Price Foundation was founded to promote the consumption of organic "nutrient-dense" foods including raw cow's milk, butter, and meat. The foundation actively cautions people against vegetarian diets, and promotes eating meat and saturated fat for good health. [95]

On Apr. 10, 2001, the *Washington Post* re-ignited public debate about slaughterhouses with their exposé "They Die Piece by Piece." The investigation found that animals in slaughterhouses were often cut apart "piece by piece" while still conscious. [66] The public outcry that followed led Congress to earmark funds specifically for enforcing the HMSA, which the USDA used to hire a veterinarian in each of its 15 districts to oversee enforcement. In 2002 Congress passed a resolution urging the USDA to fully enforce and track violations of the HMSA. [65]

In 2005 Dr. T. Colin Campbell published the results of a 20-year study conducted by Cornell University, Oxford University, and the Chinese Academy of Preventative Medicine. *The China Study* found that people who ate the most plant-based foods were the healthiest, and that people who ate the most animal-based foods developed the highest rates of diseases such as diabetes and cancer. [73] However, the study was criticized in *Wise Traditions*, the magazine of the Weston A. Price Foundation, as "biased" with evidence "selected, presented, and interpreted," in favor of a vegetarian or vegan diet. [74]

In 2006 the US market for processed vegetarian foods, such as faux meat, non-dairy milks, and frozen vegetarian entrees, was estimated to be \$1.17 billion and growing. [1]

A 2008 *Vegetarian Times* poll conducted by Harris Interactive showed 7.3 million vegetarians in the US—3.2% of the total population (1 million, or 0.5%, of those vegetarians are vegan). [67] In most countries vegetarians are a small minority, comprising about 3-5% of the population. India is an exception where approximately 35% of the population has followed a traditional vegetarian diet for many generations. [13] The average American gets 67% of his or her dietary protein



from animal sources, compared with a worldwide average of 34%. [33]

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United States Department of Agriculture (USDA)
"My Plate" showing the five essential food groups (formerly represented as the food pyramid until June 2, 2011).
Source: United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), "MyPlate Print Materials," www.choosemyplate.gov (accessed June 3, 2011)

In 2010 President Bill Clinton adopted a vegan diet (no meat, eggs, or dairy) after his second heart surgery. In Aug. 2011 President Clinton stated, "my blood tests are good, and my vital signs are good, and I feel good, and I also have, believe it or not, more energy." [119]

On June 2, 2011, Michelle Obama unveiled the USDA "My Plate" image representing the five essential food groups and replacing the previous "Food Pyramid." "My Plate" renamed the "Meat & Beans" category to the "Protein" category and changed the "Milk" category to "Dairy." The other three categories (Grains, Vegetables, and Fruits) remained the same.

A 2012 Gallup poll found that approximately 5% of Americans (15,695,702 people) considered themselves to be vegetarian, and 2% (6,278,281 people) considered themselves to be vegan. [127] Total US meat consumption in 2012 was estimated to be 165.9 pounds per person—18.1 pounds fewer than the 2004 high of 184 pounds per person. [126]

In Jan. 2013, the Active Learning Elementary School in the Flushing neighborhood of Queens, New York, became the first public school in the United States to serve an all-vegetarian menu in its cafeteria. [131]