

## Insightful conversation with a vegan naturopath

[Wendy McLean](#) | Educator

09/11/21



### In 5 minutes with ...

Tara discusses the benefits of and key tips for thriving on a vegan diet.

### Tara's details ...

Naturopath *BHSc (Nat)*, Vegan

**When and why did you decide to become vegan?** My parents chose to become vegetarian when I was about one year old and so I was raised vegetarian. Growing up being conscious of my health and what I was putting in to my body, veganism just seemed to be the next step in living an even healthier and conscious life. So, on my 25<sup>th</sup> birthday I ate my last non vegan ice-cream and 15 years later, the rest is history.

Animal welfare definitely played a role in that decision, as quoted by Pam from Edgar's mission 'if we could live happy and healthy lives without harming others, why wouldn't we?'

**How do you combine your knowledge on naturopathy with veganism? Do you see both vegan and non-vegan patients in practice?** There are so many ways that naturopathy can help me and others lead a healthy vegan life. When I was growing up in the 80's, the knowledge in Australia around vegan and vegetarian health was minimal. We were not aware of the benefits of such things as omega 3 in a vegetarian or vegan diet. I was raised with parents who were informed, as

best you could be at the time, on a healthy vegetarian diet, but it wasn't until I started studying naturopathy that I discovered there was more to being a healthy vegan than protein and vitamin B12 supplements.

Being able to combine my knowledge of nutrition as well as herbal medicine has allowed me to help educate my vegan clients on what is required to live a healthy vegan life.

My knowledge also allows me to make sure my clients are taking supplements that are entirely vegan. It is often not clear by looking at a supplement label that it is vegan. Having this knowledge allows me to ensure my clients are focusing on their health while not compromising their chosen lifestyle.

I do see both vegan and non-vegan clients. I do not push my ways on my clients, as I believe everyone needs to make these decisions for themselves. I do let all my clients know that there are great alternatives to supplements like fish oil and how focusing on a wholefoods diet will be beneficial to their health. I hold [Online Vegan Naturopathy Consults](#), but I also see non-vegan clients through [Walking Nature's Path](#).

**What are the benefits of a vegan diet?** Where do I start, there are so many. A vegan diet is generally lower in trans and saturated fats, resulting in lower cholesterol, lower blood pressure and lower heart disease. A healthy vegan diet often contains a wider range of nutrients, fibre and anti-oxidants due to the large consumption of vegetables, legumes and nuts and seeds.

There are also a lot of environmental benefits from eating a plant based diet. Research indicates that farmed animals consume more food and water than growing food for purely human consumption. In Australia, we know all about drought and water restrictions. Research indicates that it takes at least 3 times the amount of water to feed a meat eater than a vegan, due to the huge amounts required to produce meat. Studies suggest we are running out of space to feed the growing population. A vegan diet allows for more sustainable food to be grown.

And of course there is also the massive benefit of knowing you are not contributing to the death of an animal when you can live a healthy life without that animal's life being taken. Whilst these days there has been some progress in animal welfare, there is still a lot of unnecessary animal cruelty that goes along with the production of meat and animal products.

**What are some of the key nutrients vegans need to be mindful of and how can vegans ensure they obtain enough of these?** There a number of key nutrients that I focus on when looking at the diet of a vegan client. My top nutrients would be protein, Vitamin B12, Iron, Omega 3 and iodine. These are my top nutrients because these are the ones I see most often missing from a vegan diet. I conduct [Vegan Diet Assessments](#), looking at everything the client eats over a 7 day period, and these nutrients keep coming up as the key essentials that are missing.

### *Protein*

Living a healthy vegan diet does take a lot of commitment, but it can be done. In regards to protein, it is about educating clients on the main sources of protein: nuts and seeds, grains and legumes. I try to focus on protein rich foods that are easily accessible, tasty and have a good hit

## Commons

of protein such as tofu, tempeh, oats, nuts and seeds. Having a big bowl of muesli rich in oats, nuts and seeds is a great protein hit first thing in the morning. Adding tofu or tempeh to both lunch and dinner will ensure people are getting close to their RDI of protein for the day. If this is too hard for the client, a protein shake (with a [vegan protein powder](#)) for breakfast or as a snack can be an easy addition.

### *Vitamin B<sub>12</sub>*

When it comes to [vitamin B<sub>12</sub>](#), I always make sure my clients are taking a supplement. You do not mess around with B<sub>12</sub>. There are no good vegan sources of B<sub>12</sub> (no, mushrooms won't cut it!) and the irreversible nerve damage caused by deficiencies is too big to risk. A sublingual spray appears to get the best results and I have never had an issue with B<sub>12</sub> whilst taking a supplement.

### *Iron*

[Iron](#) is tricky and is a nutrient I constantly see deficiencies in, in menstruating women on a vegan diet. Vegans generally consume larger amounts of iron than meat eaters, but most iron rich vegan foods also contain phytic acid. Phytic acid found in cereals, nuts, seeds, coffee and tea, binds iron and reduces the absorption by up to 50 per cent. To reduce phytic acid make sure you soak, cook, sprout, mill or ferment iron rich foods. Foods high in iron are pumpkin seeds, chia seeds, flaxseeds, sesame seeds, tofu, parsley, coriander and spinach. Cooking a tofu stir-fry with seeds and vegies is a great way to get a decent serve of iron. I also always suggest grinding up flaxseeds before adding them to your muesli or smoothies – you can do this once a week and keep them fresh in a jar in the fridge.

### *Omega 3*

[Plant based omega 3s](#) have been getting a lot of attention recently and for good reason. I frequently suggest [omega 3 blood tests](#) for my clients and they almost always come back with low omega 3 levels. The vegan diet is often high in omega 6's, and if the ratio of omega 6 to 3 is too high, then you will get the negative effects of omega 6 (pro-inflammatory) and lose the benefits of omega 3's (anti-inflammatory). Nuts, seeds and vegetable oils are high in omega 3s, but simply eating chia seeds, flaxseeds and walnuts isn't enough to keep the 6:3 ratio at a beneficial level. I have recently been suggesting an omega 3 supplement for most of my vegan clients.

### *Iodine*

[Iodine](#) isn't a nutrient that comes up too often when talking about a vegan diet, but there aren't a lot of plant based foods that contain iodine. Nori seaweed, miso paste and oats as well as iodised salt and bread are the main foods and you would need to eat about 4 sheets of nori a day to get your recommended daily intake. With iodine playing such a big role in thyroid hormones it is one I suggest all vegans pay attention to.

**Is a vegan diet safe for children?** Absolutely. However, before you transition your child to a vegan diet, educate yourself on important nutrients and how to increase foods rich in these nutrients in their daily life. Hiding lots of veggies in their pasta sauce, making homemade muesli bars with lots of nuts and seeds, and consider a multi-vitamin if you have a fussy eater.

**What are some of your key tips for thriving on a vegan diet?** Make and prepare your own meals. It may take extra time, but this way you can make sure you are getting all the nutrients you need. Batch cooking and freezing on a Sunday afternoon is a great way to do this. Have healthy snacks on hand, like homemade hummus and carrots or a seed and nut mix. This will stop you snacking on whatever you can buy, which is normally junk food, and normally very nutrient-poor. Find somewhere healthy and yummy to eat out every now and then so you don't feel like you are missing out – a delicious falafel place, an excellent Japanese restaurant with yummy vegan sushi and miso soup.... All in all, eating a healthy vegan diet takes some planning and preparation, so if you are choosing to be a healthy vegan, know that it will take some work, but it will be worth it in the end. It is possible to live a healthy vegan lifestyle. It's one of my greatest passions as [a vegan naturopath](#).

**Many thanks Tara!**