Vegetarianism in Pregnant Women

The topic of food tends to be a very sensitive area to speak about nowadays. The way people choose to eat both in public and in private impact health either positively or negatively. When diet of an individual affects not just the person consuming the food, but other people as well, it is deemed necessary in society’s eyes to speak up and point out the eating habits of the individual. This is especially prevalent in the diet of a vegetarian. When people in society come across a vegetarian, a common stereotype is that the vegetarian must be lacking some serious nutrients and won’t last very long on a vegetarian diet. The opinion of omnivorous people in society on vegetarians is amplified when a vegetarian decides to extend their family and get pregnant. The common vital nutrients believed to be lacked by pregnant vegetarian women are protein, Vitamin B12, iron, calcium, and Omega-3 fatty acids. Despite the belief that a vegetarian is lacking key nutrients in their diet, a pregnant vegetarian woman can indeed maintain a healthful pregnancy through obtaining the vital nutrients in their diet, as well as thrive above and beyond the omnivorous pregnant woman due to the nutrient-dense fruits and vegetables consumed in a balanced vegetarian diet.

A vegetarian diet is a way of eating that lacks meat and fish. According to Debra S. Penny and Kathleen G. Miller in the article “Nutrition Counseling for Vegetarians During Pregnancy and Lactation,” The number of vegetarians is increasing, with 2.5% of Americans being vegetarian and the majority being women (37). This article continues with “The American Dietetic Association asserts that a balanced vegetarian and vegan diet is adequate to maintain health for all stages of life, including during pregnancy and lactation,” (Penny et. al. 37). Penny and Miller also emphasize that the choice of vegetarians to abstain from eating meat means that “vegetarians and vegans have been found to be more concerned about health issues and usually are fairly well informed about a balanced vegetarian diet,” (38). A vegetarian woman that becomes pregnant will need to maintain a well-rounded diet packed with macronutrients, vitamins, and minerals in order to thrive throughout their pregnancy.

The concern for protein in a vegetarian diet buzzing about these days. A pregnant woman needs to fulfill her recommended daily intake each day in order to fully support herself and her growing baby. Steven Tyree et. al. says that “for most people, adequate intake of protein is the biggest perceived concern with veganism,” (43). He goes on to state that protein sources contain essential amino acids. In a plant-based diet, “individual plant sources, however, do not provide all the necessary essential amino acids by themselves,” (Tyree et. al. 43). Those opposing a vegetarian or plant-based pregnancy use this fact to support the idea that a pregnancy that is not omnivorous is not sustainable.

Pregnant vegetarian women have no issue consuming an efficient amount of protein in their diet. According to the “Position of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics: Vegetarian Diets,” plant-based and vegetarian diets that “include a variety of plant products provide the same protein quality as diets that include meat. Protein consumed from a variety of plant foods supplies an adequate quantity of essential amino acids when caloric intake is met,” (Melina 1970). This means that a person consuming enough calories each day will surely meet their protein needs, as protein deficiency is not very likely nor common. The belief that a pregnant vegetarian woman cannot fulfill the need of essential amino acids from protein can be dismissed. As long as the vegetarian consumes a “variety of amino acids such as grains, beans, and nuts” during gestation, she can have a healthful pregnancy (Snow 297). The article “Nutritional Counseling for Vegetarians During Pregnancy and Lactation” lists a few of the many sources of protein in a vegetarian diet including tofu, eggs legumes, nuts, and seeds (Penny et. al. 39). There is a variety of protein-rich foods for a vegetarian pregnant woman to thrive off of and maintain a balanced gestation period.

The common belief of one who is opposed to vegetarian pregnancy is that the woman will lack essential the nutrients of Vitamin B12 and iron, which will negatively affect the health of both the mother and the baby. A study observing the effects of vegetarianism on pregnant women and their babies was presented by Piccoli, G.B., et al. in “Vegan-Vegetarian Diets in Pregnancy: Danger or Panacea? A Systematic Narrative Review” in which the results showed that the majority of birth defects in children of vegetarian mothers were due to the lack of iron from the mother’s diet. In this same article by Piccoli, G.B., et. al., there were higher cases of hypertensive disorders in the pregnancies of the vegetarian women. The majority of complications overall came from iron and vitamin B-12 deficiencies (Piccoli et. al.).

On the contrary, it is quite evident that a vegetarian woman can indeed live healthfully throughout her pregnancy with a variety of fruits and vegetables present in the diet that provide the nutrients that the woman needs. Catherine Saint Louis claims that the iron intake is vital for a pregnant woman, and that a vegetarian can obtain iron through dried beans, peas, leafy greens, and fortified cereals (D4(L)). This goes to show that a woman can avoid the lack of this nutrient with the consumption of iron-rich vegetarian foods, which are in fact available through a meat-free diet. Another important nutrient of concern was vitamin B12, which Catherine Saint Louis in “Is it Possible to Have a Healthy Vegetarian or Vegan Pregnancy?” says that this vitamin can easily be obtained by a pregnant vegetarian woman through tofu, nutritional yeast, fortified cereals, and soymilk. The nutrients of iron can also be obtained through “prenatal vitamins, which usually contain iron, vitamin B12, folic acid, and other nutrients,” (Louis D4(L)). A woman consuming a balanced vegetarian diet will maintain a healthful pregnancy through the sufficient amount of Vitamin B-12 and iron in their diet.

The idea that calcium is lacked in vegetarians and plant-based people is not uncommon. According to Debra S. Penny and Kathleen G. Miller, calcium has low bioavailability in plant foods (38). It is also stated that “Pregnant women who ingest sufficient calcium during the second and third trimesters of pregnancy have a higher bone mineral density, as do their children,” (Penny et. al. 38). It is believed by those opposed to vegetarian diets and vegetarian pregnancies that a person abstaining from meat will not be able to meet the daily recommended intake of calcium.

In a vegetarian diet, calcium levels are actually sustained at or above the daily recommended intake. In the article titled “Position of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics: Vegetarian Diets,” it was found that “lacto-ovo-vegetarians show a relatively high intake of calcium, often exceeding the Institute of Medicine’s recommendations,” (Melina et. al. 1970). Sufficient calcium sources include “dairy products, legumes (including soy- beans), spinach, kale, turnips, collards, broccoli, calcium-fortified soy milk, and other calcium-fortified nondairy milk alternatives and orange juice, and calcium-set tofu,” (Melina et. al. 1970). This intake of calcium-rich vegetarian foods leads to strong bones and a lower risk of osteoporosis.

As stated in “Vegetarian Diets in Pregnancy, Lactation, Infancy, and Childhood” by Natasa Fidler Mis and Rok Orel, “The avoidance of all foods of animal origin… is a risk for deficiency of several nutrients: iron, zinc, calcium, iodine, vitamin B12, B2, A, D, [DHA], proteins, and energy,” (I-133). Natasa Fidler Mis and Rok Orel also assert that DHA (docasahexaenoic acid, a polyunsaturated fatty acid) is vital to a pregnant woman’s diet “as it influences the DHA content in human milk,” (I-133). The lack of vital nutrients is due to the lack of a well-balanced, nourishing diet by the vegetarian expecting mother.

A real concern presented by omnivores and those concerned about vegetarian pregnancy nutrient deficiencies is where and how a vegetarian mother-to-be will obtain DHA. Reed Mangels in “Questions and Answers about Omega-3 Fatty Acids for Vegans” lists off a plethora of food sources that enhance the production of DHA in the human body such as avocado, fortified cereal, broccoli, flax seed, canola oil, cabbage, soy milk, peanut butter, pecans, tofu, snack bars, and many more (23). This article “Questions and Answers about Omega-3 Fatty Acids for Vegans” by Reed Mangels states that these foods enhance production of DHA because they are rich in alpha-linolenic acid, which is the acid the body needs to make the DHA in the first place (24). This way, the breast milk in the vegetarian mother will be rich in DHA for her baby to consume, combatting nutrient deficiencies and promoting health of the mother and baby.

Not only is a vegetarian diet during pregnancy sustainable, but it is even more healthful than an omnivorous pregnancy. A vegetarian has a “lower risk of obesity, heart disease, and diabetes,” (Snow 297). During gestation, a woman has a risk of complications or simply symptoms from the changes in their body. It was stated by C. Koebnick that “significant higher dietary magnesium intakes were observed in pregnant women consuming a plant-based diet… than in pregnant women consuming a control diet,” with the control diet being an omnivorous, non-vegetarian diet (Koebnick et. al. 219). Vegetarian women during pregnancy, “providing a high intake of magnesium… reduced the frequency of calf cramp, particularly during the third trimester of pregnancy, compared with the average Western diet,” (Giampieri et. al. 581). According to the article “Plant-Based and Plant-Rich Diet Patterns During Gestation: Beneficial Effects and Possible Shortcomings,” the “maternal intakes of vegetables, fruits, and selected antioxidants during pregnancy were reported to reduce the risk of wheeze and eczema in infants aged 16-24 [months],” (Giampieri et. al. 581). A balanced vegetarian or plant-based diet contains a high amount of fruits and vegetables, as well as antioxidants. This fact also leads to another astonishing point. Due to their typically imbalanced and sporadic way of living, “teenage pregnancies are potentially high risk because the typical teenage diet may lack appropriate intake of nutrients even before conception,” (Tyree et. al. 48). Even teenage pregnancies have more of a risk than a vegetarian pregnancy because during a well-planned vegetarian pregnancy, both the baby and the mother can receive the nutrients that they need while thriving at the same time and reducing complications during both pregnancy and birth.

A vegetarian pregnancy is a controversial topic to discuss, although it should not be, as a well-balanced diet can yield a healthy gestation period as well as a healthy baby. The mother will be able to consume sufficient amounts of protein, B-12, iron, and omega-3 fatty acids through the meat-free diet in order to thrive during pregnancy whilst reducing complications. Vegetarians receive a bad rep, as the exclusion of the meat food group is seen as outlandish and is less common than an omnivorous diet. Those maintaining a meat-free lifestyle can live and thrive just as healthfully as someone choosing to consume meat. In the end it’s all about variety and balance to maintain the best health possible.

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