

How Athletes Are Going Vegan and Staying Strong

From ballerinas to tennis champs this diet is way more than a trend.

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I've been dancing since I was 3," says Juliet Doherty, an 18-year-old ballerina. "When I was training, I was told protein, protein, protein all the time, but I would get so lethargic." In an effort to increase her stamina, Juliet started eliminating meat from her daily menu little by little and began seeing an improvement. By the time she cut out all animal products, Juliet knew she was onto something. "With a vegan diet, the food is dense nutritionally but not necessarily calorically, so you have to keep eating a lot throughout the day instead of just three heavy meals," she explains.

Juliet credits the continuous consumption of concentrated nutrients for her sustained stamina while en pointe. "When I'm performing or I have long days at the

theater, I still feel like I have a lot of energy," she says with a bounce in her voice. In fact, since going vegan, the talented dancer has added another gold medal to her collection of awards: at the finals in the Youth America Grand Prix, the world's largest student ballet scholarship competition. Juliet attributes her success to a combination of discipline, communication, and hard work — and becoming a vegan hasn't hampered her one bit.

Judging by the nearly half million Instagram photos tagged #veganathlete and #poweredbyplants, more and more people are beefing up without the beef, and awareness of this plant-filled lifestyle is creeping into the mainstream. For those who subscribe to a menu that includes chicken, burgers, and bacon, it might come as a surprise that others willingly remove all meat and animal products — including eggs, milk, butter, cheese, and even fish—from their diets. The exact number of vegans in the United States isn't known, but a 2012 Gallup poll found that about 2 percent of U.S. adult respondents identified as such. Some see the practice as a commitment to treating animals as friends, not food, while simultaneously reaping health benefits—an appealing factor for many athletes.

But veganism is certainly not new. One of the first people to speak of adhering to this diet was a British doctor named William Lambe, who did so in the early 1800s. In his book *Water and Vegetable Diet in Consumption, Scrofula, Cancer, Asthma, and Other Chronic Diseases*, he wrote, “My reason for objecting to every species of matter to be used as food, except the direct produce of the earth, is founded...on the broad ground that no other matter is suited to the organs of man....” Murray Rose, an Australian swimmer and six-time Olympic medalist nicknamed “The Seaweed Streak,” was one of the first renowned athletes known to have a vegan diet. Others followed his lead, turning to plants to power their stride. And Billie Jean King, a vegetarian, rocked the tennis court with 39 grand slam titles. Given the stamina of these athletes, it's clear that meat is totally optional when going for the gold.

As far as the health bonuses, which benefit athletes and mere mortals alike, many vegans report getting deeper sleep. Vegetarians also tend to weigh less than meat eaters, according to the National Institutes of Health. Clear skin may be another benefit, as vegan diets are often rich in vitamins E and A from nuts and fare like sweet potatoes, respectively. And if all this weren't enough, know that vegetarian and vegan food regimens are associated with a lower risk of heart disease and certain cancers.

Of course, following such a restrictive eating plan can be hard in the real world, which doesn't specifically cater to an animal-free ethos. And veganism is not the right choice for everyone or every athlete. “I never try to shove my diet down anyone else's throat, but it's something that's been good for me,” Juliet shares. “There's a lot of misinformation about this choice, but when I decided to do the research myself, I found that it really aligned with my core principles and values.”

For athletes, as well as anyone going vegan, it's important to stay well fed with the right foods in order to be healthy. "There are no health risks as long as the diet is well planned. Getting enough calories from fresh vegetables, fruits, beans, peas, and whole grains is important to optimize growth and performance," says Angie Eakin, M.D., M.S., who also emphasizes that vegan teens, especially girls, need to be mindful of consuming enough protein, calcium, iron, and vitamin B12. Anastasia Nevin, M.S., R.D., agrees: "Because teen years are formative for bone development, having a balanced diet with the proper amount of nutrients is vital."

Charles Passler, D.C., a New York City–based chiropractor and nutritionist whose clientele has included Victoria's Secret Angels and athletes living all over the United States, says, "The biggest challenge that vegans have is getting enough protein, B12, carnitine, and creatine, which are primarily found in meat. They're the main building blocks of growing and maintaining muscle mass and energy." One of the most common misconceptions people have, he says, is that while following a proper vegan diet they can't have the same athletic performance as meat eaters. Dr. Passler notes that this is not necessarily true, and there are numerous options with high percentages of protein, including tempeh, tofu, soy, hemp, quinoa, seeds, and beans. Vegans, he says, can give their body what it needs and still optimize their health—or performance, if they're athletes.

Knowing which foods contain the necessary nutrients to make a body strong is important, because, as Dr. Passler points out, "when an athlete isn't getting enough protein, he or she will start to experience sarcopenia." That is a fancy way to say muscle loss, a potential problem for many vegans. This is why a lot of athletes incorporate supplements like protein powders into their diet, he adds.

To help him become a better athlete, Brendan Brazier, a vegan who's a former professional Ironman triathlete and a two-time 50 km ultramarathon champion, developed a powder supplement more than a decade ago. "I was looking for a way to fill in any nutritional gaps," he says, "and I just started blending things together, trying to find something that would allow me to speed up my recovery and optimize my training time." Since then, the company he cofounded, Vega, has grown to sell a wide range of products.

Dr. Passler explains that, in general, eating vegan requires a lot of hard work and attention to detail. A bit of tofu here and some chickpeas there won't cut it —

small quantities of protein just aren't enough to meet the quota for a training athlete, which can reach as much as one gram of protein per pound of bodyweight per day, according to Dr. Passler. "If this is something that people are dedicated to making work for them, they first have to know their body. Not only that, but then they have to educate themselves on food science to be aware of exactly what they need to power themselves," he advises.

Although there's no data on the number of vegan athletes, many are as strong and able as those who eat meat. So when we think about people who have given up all animal products, we should consider them empowered instead of deprived.

If you're curious about what it takes to become a vegan, these tips will help make the transition a healthy one.

KNOWLEDGE IS POWER: There are documentaries, books, and entire magazines devoted to the vegan lifestyle—familiarize yourself so that when the time comes you can school the naysayers. Some of the best books are *Thrive Fitness: The Vegan-Based Training Program for Maximum Strength, Health, and Fitness* by Brendan Brazier and *The Kind Diet* by Alicia Silverstone (yes, Cher from *Clueless*).

SLOW AND STEADY WINS THE RACE: You won't become a vegan overnight—nor should you. The Vegan Society suggests making small changes to your diet every day. It recommends removing meat or dairy from your diet one day a week and going from there.

THERE IS NO "I" IN VEGAN: You're not alone: Many college campuses have vegan groups, and there is a vegan MeetUp in almost every major U.S. city. Also, vegan-magazine.com is a great resource if you're looking for information and a community.

TAKE IT TO GO: NatureBox is changing the way vegans snack. This subscription service delivers a box of carefully sourced vegan-approved foods right to your front door. If you feel like eating out, check happycow.net for nearby options that will meet your needs.

COOKING VEGAN: Check out websites and blogs like cookieandkate.com in order to find vegetarian- and vegan-friendly recipes—like a sweet potato burrito smothered in avocado salsa verde—to try out in your kitchen.