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Opinion Article

Replacing Meat and Dairy Products with Plant-Based Substitutes

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ABOUT THE STUDY

An increasing number of people adhere to plant-based diets and the marked for plant-based meat and dairy substitute products is rapidly expanding. However, few studies have examined the nutritional impact of replacing meat and dairy products with plant-based substitutes. Thus, the present study aimed to assess the consumption of plant-based meat and dairy substitutes in vegans, lacto-ovo vegetarians and pescatarians in Norway and examine the total intake of macronutrients and salt from substitute products.

Plant-based diets are rapidly gaining popularity in the western world. In Norway, it is estimated that approximately 1% of the population adheres to a vegan diet, 4% to a vegetarian diet and 7% to a flexitarian or semi-vegetarian diet. According to the Vegan Society, the number of vegans in the United Kingdom quadrupled from 2014 to 2019 reaching 600,000 in 2019. In Germany, 2.9% classifies themselves as vegan and 4.3% as vegetarian, and in the United States 3% of the population were vegans and 5% vegetarians in 2018. In Western societies, including Norway, common reasons for adhering to plant-based diets are putative health benefits, and environmental animal welfare concerns.

Today, a wide selection of plant-based products intended to mimic the function, taste and texture of meat and dairy in the diet are easily available. However, knowledge about the nutritional quality of plant-based substitutes and associated health effects are limited. Previous studies have suggested wide variations in nutritional quality between and within different categories of meat and dairy substitutes. Although raw ingredients in plant based substitutes, such as soy, oats and various legumes, may be associated with positive health effects, this may not necessarily apply to the final products. During food processing, nutrients such as vitamins, minerals and trace elements may be lost, and less healthy ingredients such as salt, sugar, and saturated fats may be added, altering the nutrient value of the final product. In addition, the limited knowledge of nutritional impact due to non-nutrient additives has been questioned.

In summary, most participants had consumed meat or dairy substitutes, and consumption was most frequent among vegans, followed by vegetarians and pescatarians. Vegans also had a higher contribution from the substitutes to total intake of total fat, saturated fatty acids, and protein. The participants had total macronutrient intake within NNR recommendations, presenting a favorable distribution of fatty acids in addition to high levels of dietary fiber. While traditional plant-based diets have focused on whole foods, the modern adaptation of these diets may include highly processed alternatives for meat and dairy. Little is known about the impact of plant-based substitutes on diet quality and health, but recent studies suggest meat and dairy substitutes to be associated with higher intake of ultra-processed foods and less healthy eating patterns in plant-based diets. However, an analysis found meat substitutes to contain less total fat, saturated fat and more dietary fiber than their meat counterparts, although several products contained more sodium. Gibney raises the question of whether consumption of processed foods, such as meat and dairy substitutes matter, if the total nutrient intake remains within recommendations for optimal nutrient intake.

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