

# Losing Their Veganity

Going full-on vegan in the hopes of ditching pounds? You might find your dress size going up. *WH* investigates why some women are turning in their V-cards—and how you can sidestep the pitfalls of plant-based eating.

BY LESLIE GOLDMAN



Stephanie Schwartz, a New Yorker who works in retail, tried a 21-day vegan challenge with a friend in 2015 because “I wanted to lose a few pounds and see if I could get visible abs, like all the yogi vegan Instagram girls, and this seemed like a healthy way to do it.” So Schwartz, then 25, abstained from all animal products—meat, poultry, seafood, dairy, and eggs. The trial period came and went and she stuck with it, absorbing the plan’s “cruelty-free” ethos. As her passion for animal welfare grew, though, something else did too: her waistline.

Instead of toning up, within four months “I gained 12 pounds, lost muscle tone, and felt so bloated,” she says. She also overheated easily and lost her period. “My body was like, ‘Excuse me, I don’t like this.’” She couldn’t figure it out, but

she did notice she always felt ravenous—and was constantly eating.

Like 70 percent of people who try going vegan, Stephanie ultimately went back to eating some animal products.

Interest in veganism, the stricter, coconut milk-ier cousin of vegetarianism, has surged in recent years. In Hollywood and on social media, it seems as if every flat-bellied celeb (Olivia Wilde, Jennifer Lopez, Lea Michele) is reported to have tried the lifestyle, and luminous-skinned fitfluencers (vegan chef Angela Liddon of Oh She Glows; blogger Ella Woodward of Deliciously Ella; Kristina Carrillo-Bucaram, the local-organic-raw pioneer behind FullyRawKristina) have been touting the lifestyle. Some sources show that the number of vegans in the U.S. has

spiked by as much as 600 percent in the past three years, and search interest in veganism was 460 percent higher than vegetarianism in the past year alone.

It's not surprising that an increasing number of women have taken Schwartz's tack, looking beyond veganism's moral *raison d'être* and health benefits—which include a reduced risk for heart disease, cancer, diabetes, blood-sugar issues, hypertension, and overall mortality—to a hope of weight loss. After all, while veganism is not considered a weight-loss diet per se, multiple studies have shown that people who shun animal products tend to be lighter than their omnivorous counterparts. A recent Harvard University meta-analysis found that vegans lost about five pounds more than meat eaters over an average of 18 weeks. Another study found that vegan women tend to have a BMI of 22, which is 1.5 points lower than the average of those who dig meat.

But people who go vegan specifically to shed inches may be doing themselves a disservice, says

Pittsfield, Massachusetts, nutritional



consultant Virginia Messina, R.D., M.P.H., creator of [TheVeganRD.com](http://TheVeganRD.com) and coauthor of four vegan-centric books. “Women read stories that promise the pounds will just melt away”—but simply starting your day with a quinoa bowl rather than an omelet doesn't mean you're automatically going to drop pounds.

## Vegan Diet Traps

Newbie vegans hit some common dietary roadblocks, says NYC dietitian Cynthia Sass, R.D., M.P.H. First, plenty of foods can be vegan without being good for weight loss. “Healthy, filling vegan diets require knowledge and planning,” says Sass. “Twenty years ago, eating vegan meant lots of whole grains, produce, and pulses, like beans and lentils.” Now the aisles are packed with higher-calorie shortcuts like mock meat and cheese products, and it's easy for new converts to assume that any item with an “All Vegan!” label will be somehow better. But eating processed foods means “you'll miss out on fiber, which slows down digestion, keeping you feeling fuller longer,” says Sass. She adds that fiber feeds the good-for-you gut bacteria associated with weight management.

Even if you do stick to the healthier vegan fare, it's easy to OD on portion size, given the health halo sported by “clean” but calorie-dense foods like avocados, cashews, and coconuts. Sass had a female client whose breakfast was a jumbo smoothie bowl that “probably had about 700 calories, and then she'd be sedentary all day.” Vegan or not, “anytime you eat more than you can burn, the surplus will either prevent weight loss or cause weight gain.”

Another pound-adding culprit? Skimping on protein, which is needed to maintain the muscle mass that helps keep your metabolic rate up, Sass says. Too little could lead to a loss in muscle tone, as Schwartz experienced. And finally, in the life-ain't-fair department, Messina points out that if

“Cravings can be more intense in vegans trying to slim down.”

you're already eating a healthy diet with generous amounts of fiber, good carbs like whole grains, and fruits and vegetables, you're less likely to see a stark difference on the scale when you drop all animal foods. Someone who goes from egg-and-bacon sandwiches and hamburgers to a well-rounded vegan diet, though, may start losing weight more easily.

## The Commitment Factor

Motivation also comes into play, says Sarah Hoffman, an epidemiology doctoral student at the University of North Carolina Gillings School of Global Public Health in Chapel Hill (and happily vegan for the past 16 years). Her study in the journal *Appetite* shows that subjects who decided to become vegan for ethical reasons remained so for years longer than people who went plants-only hoping for weight loss or other health-related benefits. “If you're doing it to lose weight and you have unpleasant effects, like fatigue or digestion issues, you may stop, while an ethical vegan may be more likely to stick it out, because avoiding animal products is about something bigger than themselves,” she explains.

Side effects often include cravings, which can be more intense in vegans who are looking to slim down, says Art Markman, Ph.D., a professor of psychology at the University of Texas at Austin and an expert on motivation and behavioral change. Without the larger goal of saving animals from suffering, “you may still psychologically crave the foods you're not eating and eventually give in.” Someone who feels eating beef is gross, in other words, is less likely to crave a burger. All diets involve some deprivation, but it can help to recast yourself as “plant-based” instead of “vegan,” says Markman. That reminds you of all you *can* eat (produce, grains, nuts, beans) and is less likely to lead to sex dreams featuring a gaucho at a Brazilian churrascaria.

## When It Goes Too Far

The experience of Jordan Younger, 27—whose blog, *The Blonde Vegan*, debuted in 2013—points to a more insidious drawback to veganism. Younger says she amassed 30,000 followers in just three months with recipes like Raw Vegan Peanut Butter Cups. But a year later, she was increasingly restricting her eating choices, cutting whole categories of foods (gluten, oil, sugar), and at one point even eating 10-banana smoothies as a meal. She realized she had veered into a form of disordered eating: orthorexia, a rigid fixation with eating healthfully.

Studies have shown that women with eating disorders are more likely to be vegetarians than omnivores. That doesn't mean vegetarianism or veganism causes eating disorders, explains Steven Bratman, M.D., author of *Health Food Junkies: Orthorexia Nervosa—Overcoming the Obsession with Healthful Eating*. But someone predisposed to disordered eating “may use veganism as a socially acceptable way to carry it out,” he says.

In 2014, Younger stopped eating vegan and changed her blog name to *The Balanced Blonde*. Initially she lost more

than 30,000 followers, but now she has 179,000 Instagram followers and 3 million downloads of the podcast she started in 2016. “I'm spreading the word that if you want to be plant-based, that's cool,” she says, “but you can also live healthier and eat more foods from the earth without being radically extreme.”

Stephanie Schwartz, too, felt that veganism triggered a relapse of her prior

anorexia. When she went back to fish and eggs, “my clothes fit better and my energy returned. Some days I'm still vegan, and I love the conscious aspect of eating that way, but I definitely have more energy in yoga or HIIT class when breakfast is scrambled eggs with lox, avocado, and hot sauce.” The first thing she lists now on her Bumble and Tinder dating profiles? “Recovering vegan.” ■

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## Plants-Only, the Right Way

Yes, you *can* lose weight on a vegan diet, but you have to pay attention. Skip the “mock dogs” and go for whole, unprocessed foods rich in fiber and protein. Shoot for one plant-based fat per meal (half an avocado; 1 tablespoon olive oil), as well as the below foods (and serving sizes) each day:

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| 7 one-cup servings of produce (about the size of a tennis ball). Two or three should be fresh fruit, the remainder vegetables. | 3 half-cup servings of brown rice, quinoa, teff, or other whole grains (more if you're active) |
| 3 half-cup servings of lentils, chickpeas, or other beans (more if you're physically active)                                   | 2 quarter-cup servings of nuts or seeds<br>OR 2 tablespoons of nut butter or tahini            |

**Note:** Vitamin B<sub>12</sub>, critical for red blood cell formation and neurological function, is found only in animal products, so take a supplement (and check to make sure the supplement itself is vegan). For quality, look for a USP or NSF seal.