

Paleo Vs. Vegan

Both Paleo and vegan diets have become popular in the last few years. But what are their pros and cons, and how might they affect your health? We assembled a roundtable of experts to make sense of the debate.

By Experience Life Team (@ExperienceLife) / May 2012

For generations, a great many Americans have sat down to dinner expecting to see more or less of the same thing: meat, potato, vegetable, bread. These days, it's not nearly so simple. What you'll see on any given table, and on any individual plate, depends in large part on how the eaters in question define their food ideology.

Today, popular eating styles vary — from hardcore vegan to anything-goes omnivore — and it's not all that unusual for such differences to exist within the same family or tightly knit social group.

Sometimes that coexistence is harmonious; other times, not so much. That's because eating is an intensely personal act, and one's food choices might be based on anything from cultural and religious traditions to social norms, ethical and environmental concerns, nutritional principles, and aesthetic preferences.

Proponents of divergent food traditions have been known to defend them passionately and promote them with an almost religious zeal. And nowhere is this more evident than among advocates of two inherently different approaches to eating: veganism and the Paleolithic (Paleo for short) diet.

Unlike vegetarians, who may consume eggs and dairy, vegans eat only plant-based foods — eschewing any animal products. “Paleos” typically embrace foods that harken back to what our hunter-gatherer ancestors ate — such as grass-fed meat, wild-caught fish, roots, tubers, veggies and, to some extent, fruits — while avoiding grains, legumes, sugars, processed foods, dairy (for the most part) and most anything else that did not exist pre-agriculture.

The clash between vegans and Paleos has escalated recently, with the release of dozens of books, blogs and documentary films making a case for one model or the other. Too often, though, the relative benefits and liabilities have been overshadowed by emotionally charged arguments and oversimplified science.

To better understand the precepts of each camp, we invited advocates from both sides to share their perspectives in a civil exchange. We also brought in a panel of well-informed medical and nutritional experts to help moderate.

Read on to discover how these two groups differ, what they have in common, and what makes sense for you. Who knows? You might take some tips from each camp. As integrative doc Mark Hyman, MD, puts it, “If you look at the science, there's a lot of evidence for both sides. Paleo and vegan diets are not, in many respects, mutually exclusive.”

Vegans believe animal products cause chronic disease and that a diet high in veggies, fruits and grains is best. Paleos like veggies, too, but think that grass-fed and wild meats are important for health, and they believe grains, starches and sugars are the real health-killers. Who's right? Read on — then decide for yourself.

Paleo Advocates

Nora Gedgaudas is a certified nutritional therapist and neurofeedback specialist in private practice in Portland, Ore. She's the author of *Primal Body, Primal Mind: Beyond the Paleo Diet for Total Health and a Longer Life* (Healing Arts Press, 2011).

Robb Wolf is a former biochemical researcher who studied under Paleo-pioneer Loren Cordain. Wolf is the author of the New York Times bestseller *The Paleo Solution: The Original Human Diet* (Victory Belt Publishing, 2010).

Lierre Keith is a writer, small farmer and environmental activist. Her book, *The Vegetarian Myth: Food, Justice, and Sustainability* (PM Press, 2009), has been called “the most important ecological book of this generation.”

Vegan Advocates

Brendan Brazier is a former professional Ironman triathlete and the creator of an award-winning line of vegan nutritional products. Brazier details his plant-based diet advice in *Thrive Foods: 200 Plant-Based Recipes for Peak Health* (Da Capo, 2011).

Kris Carr is a New York Times best-selling author, wellness coach and creator of CrazySexyLife.com. Carr is also the creator of the inspirational documentary Crazy Sexy Cancer. Her latest book is Crazy Sexy Diet: Eat Your Veggies, Ignite Your Spark, and Live Like You Mean It! (Skirt!, 2011).

John McDougall, MD, is a board-certified internist and founder of the McDougall Program, a 10-day residential wellness program in Santa Rosa, Calif. McDougall's latest book, coauthored with his wife, Mary, is The Starch Solution: Eat the Foods You Love, Regain Your Health, and Lose the Weight for Good! (Rodale Books, 2012).

Moderators

Joel Fuhrman, MD, is a family physician and nutritional researcher who specializes in preventing and reversing disease primarily through diet. He's the author of several books, including Eat to Live: the Amazing Nutrient-Rich Program for Fast and Sustained Weight Loss (Little, Brown and Company, 2011).

Mark Hyman, MD, is a family physician, the author of four New York Times bestsellers, and chairman of the Institute for Functional Medicine. His latest book is The Blood Sugar Solution: The UltraHealthy Program for Losing Weight, Preventing Disease, and Feeling Great Now! (Little, Brown and Company, 2012).

Frank Lipman, MD, practices internal medicine with additional training in acupuncture, Chinese medicine, functional medicine, meditation and yoga. The founder and director of Eleven-Eleven Wellness Center in New York City, Lipman's most recent book is Revive: Stop Feeling Spent and Start Living Again (Touchstone, 2009).

On Eating Animals

The Paleos Say . . .

Lierre Keith — "A Paleo diet is based on what humans and our ancestral progenitors ate. That would have been meat, especially the nutrient-dense organ meats and fat. It also would have included nuts, edible greens and some seasonal fruit. Wild meat is rich in omega-3 fatty acids and has a very different nutritional profile than factory-farmed, grain-fed meat, which is pro-inflammatory. Most Paleo people go to great lengths to get grass-fed ruminants, wild-caught fish or hunted meat rather than eat inhumanely raised factory-farmed meat."

Nora Gedgaudas — "I personally have worked on behalf of animals for a good part of my life and am deeply passionate about suffering. I see nothing in any part of the way I eat that is incompatible with any of it. There is a cycle of life (and death) of which we all are a part, and my way of eating honors that. I will also add that the health of any meat is directly related to the health of the animal that that meat came from. Any meat from an animal fed foods unnatural to it (i.e., grains and other substances commonly used as filler), shot full of hormones and antibiotics, and forced into crowded, cruel and stressful conditions is not healthy food. This is a point upon which most Paleo followers, vegans and vegetarians can commonly agree. Many people think that the Paleo diet is all about mindlessly gorging on meat with few or no vegetables. I actually eat more vegetables than most vegetarians and moderate my protein intake."

The Vegans Say . . .

Kris Carr — "As I began to connect the dots beyond just my health, a compassionate plant-based diet became the cornerstone of my activism and my spiritual practice. This way of living doesn't contribute to suffering — cellular suffering (caused by poor diet, lifestyle and environmental factors), animal torture and suffering, and planetary suffering (caused by the factory-farm system). And, all protein is not created equal — animal protein is highly acidic and not as healthy as plant protein. We get hung up on the misbelief that we must get a 'complete protein' from a single source. While mammal flesh is technically complete — meaning it contains all the essential amino acids — it's also complete with a host of problems. The FedEx guy is a complete protein, but that doesn't mean you should eat him. Eating a varied plant-based diet, on the other hand, provides plenty of protein in a safe and easy-to-digest form."

Brendan Brazier — "There is a misconception about how much effort it takes to eat a vegan diet and avoid animal products. A lot of interests want you to eat meat and dairy, which has built misconceptions into our psyche. I was a victim of that for many years, but it's not correct. If people saw how simply I eat and how little prep I put into my food, they would see how convenient it is."

The Moderators Say . . .

"The primary benefit of a vegan diet is that the removal of animal products usually necessitates a higher amount of nutrient-rich plant produce. The cons of a vegan diet could be the inclusion of too much heavily processed food, including seitan and isolated soy protein, flour, sweeteners and oils." — Joel Fuhrman

"Coca-Cola and potato chips can qualify as a 'vegan diet.' It's important to understand that doing veganism well requires a fair bit of discernment to get a healthy amount of proteins, nuts, seeds, etc. If all you're eating as a vegan is fruit and grains, you could easily get diabetes." — Mark Hyman

Daily Menu

PALEO: Robb Wolf

"A 'typical' day is tough to pin down for me. Some days, I have leftovers from dinner for breakfast. Other days, I might have some grilled salmon with fruit, or scrambled eggs with greens. For lunch, I'll have poultry or fish with a salad and sweet potato, and dinner might be pork loin and veggies in marinara over spaghetti squash. This changes based on what is seasonal and what looks good in the grocery store, what's free-range or organic, and so on. Between meals, I snack on nuts and seeds."

VEGAN: Kris Carr

"For breakfast, I have many options: organic vegetable juice or a green smoothie, seed pancakes, tofu scramble, sprouted-grain bread (or gluten-free bread) with almond butter or avocado, or millet porridge with peaches. For lunch and dinner I focus on vegetables: I might have a big salad or sautéed veggies with a tasty sauce accompanied by something like bean soup, a burrito, falafel, vegetarian shepherd's pie, tempeh Reuben with sauerkraut, or a hearty root-vegetable stew."

On Eating Grains

The Paleos Say . . .

Robb Wolf — "People who believe the prohibition of grains is extreme or unnecessary have managed to completely ignore the relevant research. When people put dogmatic doctrine (veganism) ahead of science, no amount of research will change minds. If a conventional eater wanted to embrace a more moderate version of the Paleo diet, simply avoiding all grains, as well as all liquid calories (juices, sugary coffee drinks, etc.), would be a great first step."

Nora Gedgaudas — "There is a dizzying ocean of literature in the field of immunology, gastroenterology, neurology and metabolic science pouring out right now and underscoring the adverse impacts of grains in all these areas of health. I would also say there is a lack of grasp of the depth and breadth of gluten's devastating influence over more disease processes than I have room to list here (no fewer than 55 diseases are known clearly to be associated with grain consumption). The undeniable connection between grains and every manner of immunological, inflammatory, neurological and physiological disease process is literally overwhelming and deeply, deeply troubling. It is literally a public health catastrophe. According to the journal Gastroenterology, the incidence of full-blown celiac disease (the mere tip of the gluten-intolerance iceberg) has increased 400 percent in the last 50 years alone. No one who lives or breathes anywhere on this planet has a 'grain deficiency' . . . but countless millions suffer from the myriad potentially devastating effects of grains on their health, many of whom don't even suspect the underlying culprit. What is 'extreme' is not the avoidance of grains but their unprecedented and unnatural prevalence in our modern food supply. We've only been incorporating grains for no more than the last 0.4 percent of our total evolutionary history (2.6 million years). We are simply ill designed and poorly suited to consume these foods."

The Vegans Say . . .

John McDougall — "Cereal grains are currently the most important nutritional component of the human diet — and for more than 10,000 years, grains have been recognized as staples and were once extolled as 'the staff of life.' The most important support for my conclusion that we are close to vegan, primarily starch-eaters is based on an observation that you can easily validate for yourself: All large populations of trim, healthy people throughout written human history have obtained the bulk of their calories from starch. Examples of thriving people now and in the past include Japanese and Chinese in Asia eating rice, buckwheat and sweet potatoes; Mayans and Aztecs in Central America who ate corn; and Egyptians in the Middle East who once thrived on wheat."

Kris Carr — "Refined grains act like sugar in the body and are not recommended. However, along with legumes, nuts, seeds, and a wealth of vegetables and fruits, whole grains such as quinoa, brown rice, kamut, amaranth and others are filling, offer quick energy, are simple for our bodies to digest, and are a key component of a healthy diet."

The Moderators Say . . .

"I think the Paleo argument of no grains is interesting and has some merit. If you go with traditional grains, such as buckwheat, quinoa and millet, which have been around for 10,000 years, you're better off. But gluten-containing refined grains, and modern dwarf wheat full of super-starch and super-gluten, can be problematic." — Mark Hyman

"When it comes to crafting your own eating plan, listen to your body. I think we are all biochemically unique, and there is no one right diet that works well for everyone. But for many people, both the Paleo and the vegan diets can work well, and there are aspects to both I like a lot, especially avoiding sugar and dairy [for most Paleos], not counting calories, and rather simply eating recommended foods. It's important in the vegan diet to get adequate protein, vitamin B12 and omega-3 fatty acids and to not eat too much sugar or gluten. On the Paleo diet, try to avoid factory-farmed meats and only eat low-mercury fish." — Frank Lipman

"The biggest potential benefits of a Paleo diet are that it is low-glycemic and it prohibits refined foods, concentrated sweeteners and processed grains — foods that are at the foundation of our obesity and diabetes epidemic. It can be an unhealthy way to eat, though, if you're using commercially raised meats, or if the ratio of plant produce to animal products is not high enough." — Joel Fuhrman

On The Environment

The Paleos Say . . .

Nora Gedgaudas — "The idea of meat-eating being necessarily destructive to the environment is absurd (unless we're talking about feedlot farming, which I would never advocate). The planet is filled with plentiful non-agricultural grassland that can be used for sustainably raising livestock." Lierre Keith — "The food I eat builds topsoil, requires no fossil fuel, supports local farmers who are my neighbors, repairs habitat and waterways, and sequesters carbon. In contrast, every form of row-cropping releases carbon. Indeed, agriculture marks the beginning of global warming. But grasslands sequester carbon at an extraordinary rate."

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The Vegans Say . . .

Brendan Brazier — "Seventy percent of land used in North America to grow food is used for animal feed. By growing it and passing it through an animal first, a lot of energy is lost. Yes, some plains are better suited to grazing and supporting pasture-fed animals, but if we all followed the Paleo lead and ate meat three times a day, we couldn't meet the demand. There just wouldn't be enough food for everyone without agriculture."

John McDougall — "People who make the claim that agriculture is the most destructive thing people have ever done to the planet — and that it leads to deforestation of rainforests and destruction of prairies — are often overlooking the impact of livestock on the environment. The largest part of that deforestation is done to grow cattle, pigs, sheep and chicken for Westerners. The amount of land used to grow calories from animal food is 17 times greater than the amount required to grow the same number of calories from starches (potatoes, etc.)."

The Moderators Say . . .

"Reaching an optimal diet can be achieved in several ways. Some indigenous cultures like the Pima Indians ate a diet that was 80 percent plant-based. On the other hand, Inuits eat a diet that is 80 percent animal fat. Both are fine. If everybody is fighting with each other about what kind of foods we should be eating, we are missing the bigger picture of how industrialized foods are destroying the earth." — Mark Hyman

"I advise all people to avoid foods that have been altered by processing or environmental toxins. You can't assume that just because cavemen ate a certain type of food, that type of food is the same in this day and age. For example, Paleo fishermen caught fish without mercury, dioxin and sex-altering hormones, but it's very hard to find clean fish these days, even if you catch them yourself." — Frank Lipman

On Processed/Industrialized Foods

The Paleos Say . . .

Robb Wolf — “Modern foods bypass the evolutionarily evolved appetite-control mechanisms. Doughnuts, waffles, bagels and ice cream are pretty darn yummy. It takes a strong desire to be healthy to forgo these foods! If, however, folks are willing to give a Paleo diet an earnest try for 30 days, they find the cravings for modern, processed foods tend to decrease, and adherence is quite easy.”

Lierre Keith — “I destroyed my body eating a vegan diet. I now have a degenerative disease of the spine and an autoimmune disease. The Paleo diet is the only diet that has helped. The taste is so satisfying compared with the low-fat, hormonally disruptive soy glop laced with rancid industrial oils that I ate for 20 years.”

The Vegans Say . . .

Kris Carr — “I totally agree that processed foods are unhealthy. No matter where they come from. But processed foods are totally unnecessary. People often use them when transitioning to a plant-based diet because they are afraid to give up the idea and texture of chicken, beef, etc. But real food is the only food that will truly serve us. We don't need meat or a meatlike substance at the center of our plates. Plants contain all the nutritional value we need.”

Brendan Brazier — “A vegan diet is so broad now and can technically include refined and processed foods such as vegan ice cream and vegan hot dogs. That's one of the reasons I developed the Thrive diet, so that it's not just about not eating animal products. There is a lot more in common between the Thrive diet and a Paleo diet than there is different between the two. I advocate for a lot of whole, unprocessed foods, and I'm not a big grain eater.”

From Disease to Wellness

All our Paleo and vegan sources are passionate about their respective diets' potential for healing the body. For example, Robb Wolf says he came to embrace a Paleo style of eating because his vegan diet caused his health to degrade. Lierre Keith (a former vegan) and Nora Gedgaudas (a former vegetarian) had similar experiences. In contrast, Kris Carr embraced veganism almost a decade ago after being diagnosed with stage 4 vascular cancer (her tumors are currently dormant). Here's a closer look at both Wolf's and Carr's “aha!” moments:

PALEO: Robb Wolf

“I became very ill eating a vegan diet. I had ulcerative colitis, IBS and a host of other problems. I had started eating a vegan diet thinking this was a healthy way of eating. At the time, I was a research biochemist, and someone suggested that my problems might be resolved with the adoption of an ancestral (Paleo) way of eating. Within a few weeks of adopting a Paleo diet, my ulcerative colitis was gone, as were my other health concerns. I've been eating this way for 15 years now and have experienced better health than at any previous point in my life. Although the Paleo diet advocates the consumption of animal products, it is a thoughtful way of eating congruent with both ethics and sustainability, and I make this a large part of the education I provide.”

VEGAN: Kris Carr

“I was diagnosed with an incurable cancer. After I thoroughly researched many diets and consulted top functional-medicine doctors, I determined the vegan diet was the best plan to reduce inflammation, boost the immune system and increase longevity. In the beginning of my diagnosis I was very symptomatic. Since changing my diet (reducing stress and exercising more), the quality of my life has improved dramatically. I feel healthier, have more energy and better blood work, I don't get colds, and I no longer struggle with my weight. Cancer aside, my body was breaking down. At 30 years old, I had lots of health issues that I had learned to live with: terrible allergies, chronic bronchitis, infections, eczema, irritable bowel syndrome, high cholesterol and a host of other problems. All that changed when I changed what I put on my plate.”

Rookie Mistakes

PALEO PITFALLS

Not eating enough veggies. “A lot of protein is not necessarily better,” says Nora Gedgaudas, who notes that she eats more vegetables than most vegetarians. “Eating sufficient ‘complete’ source protein is very important.” Also, she adds, if you are coming from a vegetarian or vegan background, “the biggest mistakes you can make are changing too much too soon and diving into consuming lots of meat before your body has readapted to the idea.”

Not being selective about the meat you are eating. Clean healthy fats from grass-fed or wild animals — not industrial, factory-farmed animals — are one of the foundations of the Paleo diet. Industrially farmed meats are considered toxic.

Presuming low-fat is better for you. “Assuming that the leanest possible meat and low fat are the ‘healthy’ way to go can result in fatigue and energy compromise along with aggravated carbohydrate cravings,” says Gedgaudas, who derives the majority of her daily calories from animal and other whole-food-sourced fats.

VEGAN GAFFES

Relying on meat-analog products. Many people transition to a vegan diet by loading up on nonmeat products that mimic the taste and texture of beef, chicken and pork. But you’d be better off avoiding these highly processed, soy-laden foods and sticking to plant-based whole foods instead.

Making a sudden switch. “I made the mistake of jumping in too quickly,” says Brendan Brazier. “Start with one meat-free, veggie-heavy meal or even one snack a day, like a smoothie. As you slowly start to incorporate more whole foods, your palate will change and the cravings will go away.”

Eating too much processed food in general. “Eat real food. Eat plants. Remember: The core of the words ‘vegan’ or ‘vegetarian’ is vegetables! You’ve gotta eat them to benefit from this way of eating,” says Carr.