

HOW TO GO VEGAN



Your Go-To Guide for Going Vegan

by Emily Moran Barwick

A BiteSizeVegan.org Get Started Guide

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How to Go Vegan

If you're seeking help with going vegan, you've already done the hardest part: making the decision! While it's perfectly natural to feel overwhelmed and even intimidated with the “nuts and bolts” of *how* to go vegan, reaching the point of understanding *why* you should go vegan—and actually deciding to take action—is by far the most challenging step. *Going* vegan is the easy part!

This page provides some guidance to help you get started on your vegan journey with confidence.

A Note on Willpower

It's a common misconception that going vegan takes super-human willpower. Willpower is needed when continually depriving yourself of something, but the truth is, vegan diets vary just as much—and often even more!—than non-vegan diets. Many people discover entirely new foods and cuisines when going vegan, and with the array of vegan substitutes these days, it's hard to find a food that doesn't have a vegan alternative! It's likely you won't even need to change the nature of what you eat—just replace the non-vegan options with vegan ones. Vegan burger for burger, vegan milk for milk, etc. The hard part nowadays is deciding *which* vegan burger or milk!

On a higher level, reframing your thinking about going vegan can be powerful. After all, going vegan isn't about deprivation—quite the opposite. It's not that you *can't* eat animal products—it's that you don't *have* to anymore. You no longer have to contribute profoundly to the destruction of our environment with your dietary choices. You no longer have to damage your health with the adverse impacts of animal products. You no longer have to contribute to the [diversion of food, water and resources](#) to the animals we use for food. You no longer have to pay other people to harm and kill sentient, feeling beings in your name.

Lay Your Foundation First

The most important aspect of going vegan isn't your meal plan—it's your “why”. If you have a clear reason for *why* you want to go vegan—and connect with it fully—going and staying vegan is not a challenge. No one can tell you your “why” but you. If you go vegan for someone else, you're more likely to go back to eating and using animals eventually.

This decision has to come from within yourself, and tied to something genuine. Veganism then becomes integrated into your core values, rather than viewed as some “diet” you're trying. In the beginning, it may even be helpful to write down your “why” and keep it in your pocket or wallet to remind yourself. You can also choose an object or piece of jewelry that signifies your “why” to keep as a reminder. These suggestions may sound silly, but we humans tend to connect with concrete and tactile things over concepts—in moments of doubt, having something solid and tangible can make a huge difference.

Where to Start & How Fast to Go



There are an infinite number of ways to be a vegan when it comes to dietary choices. A vegan diet simply means not eating anything of animal origin. Beyond that, it's a free-for-all. *Your* veganism doesn't have to look like anyone else's. No two vegans are alike—just like no two people are alike.

While the diversity of choices for eating vegan is a great thing, it can be overwhelming when trying to determine where—and how—to start. The most basic and sustainable approach to transitioning to a vegan diet is straight substitution. This approach is just what it sounds like: take your normal meals and make them vegan!

When it comes to the question of how “fast” to go, using straight substitution is a way of going fully vegan “overnight” without the “shock” of a massive dietary change. I've heard from a lot of people who attempt to go from a junk food diet—akin to the Standard American Diet—to a “high raw” vegan, living off of only carrots and wheatgrass juice. Unsurprisingly, they fall back into consuming animal products. Going vegan wasn't the problem—it was making such a dramatic shift, and not consuming adequate calories and nutrition. That's not a realistic transition, nor a sustainable way of eating.

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Outside of not consuming enough food, what often pulls people back to their old ways of eating is comfort, habit, and emotional ties. Food is very powerful culturally and emotionally. Certain dishes may have a powerful draw for you due to your upbringing or experiences you've had around those meals. Taste and smell can evoke emotions and memories in an instant.

Going fully vegan all at once doesn't have to be a jarring experience. By substituting what you currently eat with vegan alternatives, you can go vegan all at once, rather than in "stages", and still have the comfort of routine and familiarity.

As you progress in your vegan journey, you *may* want to branch out into some new and different foods and ways of eating, whether for health and nutritional reasons, or to experience something new. This won't be true for everyone, of course—if you're comfortable with your vegan diet the way it is, stick with it!

A Note on Vegan Alternatives

While more and more vegan alternatives are indiscernible from "the real thing," you may find some options do not taste *exactly* like your old favorites. If you're unhappy with a particular brand, try another. It's human nature to assume that because you don't like one brand of vegan cheese, for example, *all* vegan cheese is gross. But if you ever had a brand of dairy cheese that you didn't like, did that mean that *all* dairy cheese was gross?

In addition to brand variations, if you're new to cooking with vegan ingredients, it may take some time to become familiar with how to prepare them the way you like. Be patient—you may even find the difference in taste to be an improvement! Never give up on your first attempt, and remember that diving into some vegan junk food when the urge to give up arises is a *far* better solution than going back to animal products.

Aside from issues of taste preference, the two most common barriers to successful straight substitution are finances and availability. If finances are tight, some straight substitutions may be more expensive, especially if you eat a lot of processed cheese, deli meats, or other packaged foods. Or you may not have stores that supply many vegan alternatives in your area.

If it's an issue of availability, there may be options that you've not even known to look for in your local stores. Be sure to ask staff for help. If they don't carry the options you're looking for, you can always request that they do—if there's interest, many stores will bring in requested options.

Of course, you don't *have* to include vegan alternatives in your diet at all, but if you're wanting to, but have limited finances and/or product availability, you can make your own vegan milk, cheese, and meats.

For help eating vegan on a budget, [see the section on eating vegan on a budget and addressing issues of access.](#)

What to Expect When Going Vegan

Change can be scary! Knowing what to expect in advance provides some stability and assurance. While no two vegan journeys are the same, this section covers some of the potential physical and emotional experiences you may have while going vegan.

What to Expect Physically



It's truly impossible to tell you what you will experience physically when going vegan. First of all, there is no *one* "vegan diet." Veganism simply defines what (or, more accurately, *whom*) you *don't* eat—not what you *do* eat.

The physical effects of eating a whole-foods, organic, produce-heavy vegan diet are likely to be different than a vegan junk food diet. Additionally, your individual health status, conditions and history impact the way your body will respond.

When switching to a vegan diet, many people *do* experience an increase in energy, improved digestion, a clearer complexion, less body odor, faster recovery after exercise, and more. However, it is extremely important to note that such health benefits are *not* guaranteed. Everyone's experience is different. The myriad of variables involved are beyond the scope of this (or, I'd argue, *any*) guide.

The one universal change you *can* expect from a dietary aspect is consuming fewer animal products, since you won't be eating *any*. While this may seem like a silly thing to include, it's important to remember that animal products are a "package" deal.

When eating a plant-based vegan diet, you can expect to consume *no* dietary cholesterol, animal protein, body secretions, antibiotics, growth hormones, pus, blood, or poop (although that last one may be a gamble depending on how your produce is grown).

Plant foods are the only foods with fiber, a disease-fighting nutrient of which an astounding 97% of Americans don't get enough.¹ If you include produce in your diet, you'll also be eating more antioxidants, phytonutrients, hydrating foods, vitamins and minerals.

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I do want to re-emphasize that you can craft your vegan diet in whatever way works for you. If health is not a high priority with you, there's plenty of **vegan junk food choices**—after all, the animals don't care what you eat, as long as it's not them!

A Note on Weight Loss

One question many new vegans have is: how much weight will I lose? If you're coming to veganism from a primarily health-motivated place, this may be your major concern. The answer is: it depends.

There are countless factors that determine one's weight. As stated in the previous section, there is no single "vegan diet," and everyone's bodies are different. From a purely caloric standpoint, plant foods are *usually* far less calorie-dense than animal foods. However, it is overly simplistic to link weight loss or gain *solely* to caloric intake and expenditure.

I'd also like to note that weight loss (and weight in general) is not in and of itself a reliable indicator of one's health. Additionally, it's important to remember that being vegan doesn't *automatically* equal being healthy.

What to Expect Emotionally

Any life change can produce strong emotions, and [going vegan is no exception](#). On the purely dietary side of things, you may experience some withdrawal-type symptoms or even “grieve the loss” of your favorite dishes. Food is deeply tied to our emotional memory and our cultural and familial traditions. The good news is that you can “veganize” all of your favorite dishes! Even if you’re not much of a chef, the list of vegan ready-made alternatives continues to grow and increase in availability.

"When you go vegan, you'll have peace of mind knowing that you're finally living your values.

You can go to sleep every night knowing that no one had to die for your meal. That no blood was shed on your account. That you've made the most impactful, incredible decision of your life.

That is what you can expect."

— Emily Moran Barwick

On a more profound level, you may experience [some emotional upheaval](#) when coming to terms with what you've been supporting your whole life. It's natural to become overwhelmed as you start to [come face-to-face](#) with the horrors of the animal products industry—the brutalization of [sentient beings](#), the [destruction of the environment](#), the [health impact](#) upon yourself, friends, and family, the [diversion of global food and water resources](#). It's a lot to take in, to say the least.

You may become frustrated with yourself that you didn't go vegan sooner—but it's important to acknowledge that you *have* made the choice to take action *now*. It's *never* too late to change—your story will be a powerful testament to others who feel they've waited too long.

For more in-depth guidance on what to expect emotionally, from navigating the transition, to overcoming social challenges, please see the dedicated post "[What to Expect Emotionally When Going Vegan](#)."

The Emotional Upside of Living Your Values

One of the most exciting things you can expect from going vegan is to finally be living in line with your values. I think it's safe to say that most people love animals, but continue to consume and exploit them. When we live in a way that conflicts with our values, it takes a toll—whether we're aware of it or not.

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We must maintain a **severe disconnect** deep within ourselves in order to be able to love our cats and dogs while we pay others to enslave, torture and kill pigs, cows, and chickens for us. It doesn't make sense, and leads to the absurd objections we throw around when confronted with the discontinuity. The bare truth is that we don't want to face our actions.

The same is true of **environmentalism**. Many people want to be environmentally-conscious. They recycle, take shorter showers, even drive hybrid cars. But nothing makes nearly as large an impact on the planet as what we eat.

We all want to think of ourselves as good people. But when we are contributing to the **murder of innocent beings**, the **destruction of the planet**, the diversion of food and resources, and the **endangerment of our society's health as a whole**, we have to do some pretty intense mental gymnastics to preserve this concept of ourselves.

When you go vegan you'll have peace of mind knowing that you're *finally* living your values. As Franz Kafka said while viewing **fish in an aquarium**:

"Now I can look at you in peace; I don't eat you any more."

— *Franz Kafka*

You can go to sleep every night knowing that no one had to die for your meal. That no blood was shed on your account. That you've made the most impactful, incredible decision of your life. *That* is what you can expect.

Know Your Nutrition



Nutrition is one of the most common concerns for new and potential vegans. There is a widespread misconception that it's difficult to impossible to get adequate nutrition on a vegan diet. The truth is that a balanced whole-plant-foods-based diet can have a profoundly positive impact on your health—even preventing and reversing the [#1 killer](#) worldwide: heart disease.²

While a vegan diet can definitively be nutritionally sufficient and health-promoting, it's important to note that “vegan” does not equal “healthy” by default. As mentioned earlier in this guide, there is an *astounding* array of vegan junk foods available: ethically sound, yes—but nutritionally, not so much. This is not to say that vegan treats have no place in a healthy lifestyle—just that their vegan status should not be taken as a synonym for balanced nutrition.

Unfortunately, one of the greatest barriers to understanding vegan nutrition is wading through the staggering amount of misinformation and disinformation. Even with a cursory search, it doesn't take long to start finding directly conflicting advice. Always be vigilant in assessing the source of any nutritional information. There are plenty of cases of nutritional studies, governmental recommendations, and even [independent bloggers](#) tailoring their content to industry and corporate influences.³

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A great place to start is the [Vegan Nutrition Concerns series](#), which addresses head-on the common nutrient-specific concerns when transitioning to a vegan diet—including specific concerns for children—and touches upon the health impact of animal products. The series covers [protein](#), [B12](#), [omega 3 fatty acids](#), [iron](#), [calcium](#), [vitamin D](#), [zinc](#), [iodine](#), and even [carnitine](#), [creatine](#), and [carnosine](#).

With all the noise and misinformation about nutrition, and the ever-cycling dietary trends and fads, these resources provide grounded information on ensuring proper nutrition on a vegan diet.

A Note on Supplements

A well-balanced, whole-foods-based vegan diet is positively packed with nutritional goodness. However, there are certain nutrients you should pay particular attention to, and possibly supplement.

[Vitamin B12](#) supplementation is highly recommended. The effects of B12 deficiency are incredibly serious, and can take significant time to develop after the cessation of adequate intake. Luckily, the solution is simple: supplement! While it's possible to get adequate B12 through fortified vegan foods, supplementing is far more convenient, and less expensive.

With our modern methods of water sanitation, and the state of our soil, non-fortified foods are not reliable sources of Vitamin B12. Even the animal products industries give the cows, pigs, and chickens B12 supplements! So, skip the middle animal, and go for the source yourself!

Learn more about Vitamin B12 and recommended intake levels in "[B12 On A Vegan Diet](#)," from the [Vegan Nutrition Concerns series](#), where you'll also find information on the other main nutrients to watch: [omega 3 fatty acids](#), [iron](#), [calcium](#), [vitamin D](#), and [iodine](#).

Grocery Shopping for Vegan Food



When you're a brand new vegan, or attempting to go vegan, it can seem daunting to shop for food. Where do you find these elusive vegan items? What do all the crazy ingredients on labels mean? Why the heck are eggs and dairy in *so many things* unnecessarily?

It's impossible to provide guidance that is totally universal, as every country, state, city, area, and even grocery store is different. This section addresses some of the general basics. These may not apply perfectly to your experience, depending on your location.

Work the Perimeter & Go for Bulk

Usually, your best bet for vegan options—especially whole-food options—is to work the perimeter. Most stores are designed such that the outer perimeter houses the fresh produce and bulk sections. Not only is it cheaper to buy unpackaged bulk items, but you're more likely to find vegan foods—and easily avoid sneaky ingredients.

Fruits and vegetables are an easy pick. They have one ingredient, so there's no question about hidden animal-derived ingredients—except the wax on some fruits. Most grocers don't have the information on which fruits are coated with beeswax or shellac rather than plant-derived wax. If you're wanting to fully avoid potential animal-derived coatings, you can contact the farms individually and ask what they use. Or, if you're in a position to, you can [grow your own fruits and vegetables](#).

Bulk sections are another “safe zone” in that most of them only have one ingredient. Rice, oats, beans, et cetera. One thing to keep an eye out for is bulk granola, which can contain honey or milk-chocolate pieces.

Many larger grocery stores have a “natural” section of some sort. This is often where you can find vegan cheeses, meats, ice creams, yogurts, cream cheese, chips, and more—basically the vegan version of the rest of the grocery store. In other stores you'll find the vegan cheese by the dairy cheese, the vegan milk by the dairy milk, the vegan meats by the flesh meats, et cetera. You'll learn the layout of your store with time—don't be afraid to ask for help.

One word of caution about “natural” sections—just because something is in the natural section, doesn't mean it's vegan. These sections also contain products with other distinctions, such as gluten-free, antibiotic-free, organic, et cetera—none of which mean they are vegan. Always check the ingredients to be sure—even meat-free does not mean vegan. Many Morningstar brand meat-free products, for example, contain eggs and dairy.

Where to Shop?

Vegan food isn't as elusive as it may seem at first. In fact, you already buy and eat vegan food—ever had fruit? rice? beans? It's even possible to find vegan options at a gas station—though I'd not recommend that as your primary source for groceries! Here are some of the options that may be in your area.

Supermarkets & Larger Chain Grocers

Every supermarket carries staple vegan food, and many are consistently increasing their inventory of vegan alternatives, like vegan cheeses, meats, milks, and more. Follow the tips [above](#) for finding the vegan options in your store, and never be afraid to ask for help!

Co-ops & Natural Grocers

Local co-ops and natural grocers are often fantastic sources of vegan food, and may be more likely to stock something by request than a large chain store. I've even arranged with my local co-op to be able to order bulk organic produce directly through their supplier, which I pick up at the co-op. Get to know your local grocers!

Farmers' Markets

Farmers markets can be a true gem, and an ideal source of fresh produce. The only thing more local would be food from your own backyard! If you're a produce junkie, like myself, you can always ask about bulk discounts—especially if you're a repeat customer.

Community Supported Agriculture (CSA)

Community Supported Agriculture programs directly connect consumers with farmers, providing benefits to both. Farmers, or sometimes a group of farms, offer shares—sometimes called memberships or subscriptions—which usually consist of a weekly assortment of their current harvest. Most often, this will be a box or bag of produce, but some CSAs may include animal products, so be sure to get the details of each CSA before purchasing a share. Some CSAs distribute the same assortment to all members, while others are open to some individualization.

Eating Vegan on a Budget & Addressing Issues of Access

Despite the common misconception, eating vegan doesn't have to be expensive. It's even possible to [eat vegan on \\$4 a day!](#) As mentioned above, many vegan staples are incredibly affordable—especially when purchased in the bulk sections of stores—and cruising your local farmers' markets, or connecting with a CSA can help cut down costs.

You can find more money-saving tips and content covering budgeting and accessibility in the [Vegan On A Budget series](#).

If your circumstances are such that you're struggling to afford or otherwise access healthy food, there may be resources available in your area. Many countries have governmental food assistance programs, and food pantries provide free food for community members in need. While it is again impossible to provide guidance that is totally universal, below are a few guideposts for finding assistance. For an updated list of resources for finding access to fresh food, please see the "Resources For Finding Access To Fresh Food" accordion in the "Eating Vegan on a Budget & Addressing Issues of Access" section of [the Go Vegan Guide page](#).

Food Pantries

Depending on where you live, and what your circumstances are, getting access to quality produce and healthful foods can be challenging. Food pantries are an incredible resource if you're in need of some assistance. Depending on your area and the season, many pantries will have organic produce, and even carry vegan alternatives like vegan milks, cheeses, and more. The assortment of food will fluctuate week to week, so don't give up if your first trip wasn't very fruitful.

There are even programs that connect local gardeners and community gardens with food pantries to donate their excess harvest, both reducing food waste and increasing accessibility to fresh, local, often organic produce.

Community Gardens & Growing Your Own Food

There's nothing more fresh, local and budget-and-planet-friendly than [growing your own food](#). You don't even need a yard of your own—many people successfully grow plants in apartments!

Another option is participating in a community garden. Urban farming is a worldwide movement, establishing gardens in unused land, both increasing accessibility to fresh produce, and reconnecting people with their food.

Don't Give Up & Remember Your Why

The hardest part of being vegan is living in a non-vegan world. Becoming acutely and painfully aware of the extreme exploitation and cruelty all around you can be overwhelming, to say the least. You may struggle to explain your new path to friends and family. You may feel isolated and unsure of yourself. Don't give up. *You are not alone.*

You can find guidance for navigating these moments, as well as common challenges for [new vegans](#), such as dining out, [socializing](#), [dealing with friends and family](#), and [finding hope and joy](#) in difficult times on the [Stay Vegan Guide](#).

More than anything, it's in these times of struggle and doubt, that it's so very vital to remember your *why*. More than any tips and tricks anyone can offer, staying connected to why you've decided to go vegan will keep you grounded.

You may have lost the "comfort" of denial, but you've gained the comfort of knowing you no longer have to participate in and support horrific acts of violence, the destruction of our planet, and the diversion of global resources. The impact of your decision to go vegan reaches *far* beyond yourself.

Stay open. Keep learning. This is just the beginning.

A Note from Emily



Thank you for downloading this guide to going vegan. Even more importantly, thank you for your decision to go vegan! It is truly one of the single most impactful decisions you can make.

What (or more so *whom*) we eat impacts **our planet**, **our health**, **our society**, and—more than anything else—the **sentient beings we breed, kill, and consume**.

I so hope this guide has been helpful. For more tools and resources from BiteSizeVegan.org, including the **other Get Started Guides** for all stages of your vegan journey, be sure to check out the website tour on the **How to Use This Site** page!

I wish you the best on your journey. Never doubt that you can make a difference in this world.

— Emily Moran Barwick

Citations

1. Clemens, Roger, Sibylle Kranz, Amy R. Mobley, Theresa A. Nicklas, Mary Pat Raimondi, Judith C. Rodriguez, Joanne L. Slavin, and Hope Warshaw. "Filling America's Fiber Intake Gap: Summary of a Roundtable to Probe Realistic Solutions with a Focus on Grain-Based Foods." *The Journal of Nutrition* 142, no. 7 (July 2012): 1390S-401S. <https://doi.org/10.3945/jn.112.160176> ([↑ go back](#))
2. C. B. Esselstyn et al., "A Strategy to Arrest and Reverse Coronary Artery Disease: A 5-Year Longitudinal Study of a Single Physician's Practice," *The Journal of Family Practice* 41, no. 6 (December 1995): 560-68, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/7500065>; Caldwell B. Esselstyn et al., "A Way to Reverse CAD?," *The Journal of Family Practice* 63, no. 7 (July 2014): 356-64, https://dresselstyn.com/JFP_06307_Article1.pdf; Caldwell B. Esselstyn Jr., "Foreword: Changing the Treatment Paradigm for Coronary Artery Disease," *American Journal of Cardiology* 82, no. 10: 2-4, accessed April 23, 2016, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0002-9149\(98\)00714-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0002-9149(98)00714-0); C. B. Esselstyn, "In Cholesterol Lowering, Moderation Kills," *Cleveland Clinic Journal of Medicine* 67, no. 8 (August 2000): 560-64, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/10946449>; Esselstyn; Caldwell B. Esselstyn Jr. and René G. Favaloro, "Introduction: More than Coronary Artery Disease," *American Journal of Cardiology* 82, no. 10: 5-9, accessed April 23, 2016, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0002-9149\(98\)00715-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0002-9149(98)00715-2); C. B. Esselstyn, "Resolving the Coronary Artery Disease Epidemic Through Plant-Based Nutrition," *Preventive Cardiology* 4, no. 4 (2001): 171-77, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/11832674>; Caldwell Esselstyn and Mladen Golubic, "The Nutritional Reversal of Cardiovascular Disease – Fact or Fiction? Three Case Reports," 2014, https://www.dresselstyn.com/Esselstyn_Three-case-reports_Exp-Clin-Cardiol-July-2014.pdf; C. B. Esselstyn, "Updating a 12-Year Experience with Arrest and Reversal Therapy for Coronary Heart Disease (an Overdue Requiem for Palliative Cardiology)," *The American Journal of Cardiology* 84, no. 3 (August 1, 1999): 339-41, A8, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/10496449>; Michael Greger, M.D. and Gene Stone, *How Not to Die: Discover the Foods Scientifically Proven to Prevent and Reverse Disease* (Flatiron Books, 2015), <https://amzn.to/1To9foj>. ([↑ go back](#))
3. These selected posts delve into aspects of industry influence, from the egg industry in the United States soliciting faulty nutritional studies to government nutrition recommendations for children being shaped by the animal products industries.

Each post contains citations to primary sources. For more content addressing industry influence, [see this page](#).

— "[The Great Egg Conspiracy: Lies, Corruption & Kevin Bacon](#)" extensively covers the underhanded tactics of the egg industry in the United States, especially the government-funded American Egg Board.

— "[The Crime Of Raising Vegan Kids | When Diet Is Deadly](#)" delves into industry and corporate influences upon government nutrition programs and recommendations, focusing specifically on children. ([↑ go back](#))