Ask Anya

Anya Todd RD, LD is a vegan dietitian residing in Cleveland, OH. She credits her coonhounds, and their need for several daily walks in maintaining her girlish figure.

Q: Will a vegan diet help me lose weight?

Diet is just one of many factors that affect weight loss, along with physical activity level, genetics, and hormones. That being said, a whole-foods vegan diet, which is rich in fruits, vegetables, legumes, and whole grains, can help you lose weight.

Vegans in general have lower BMI levels than vegetarians and omnivores. BMI stands for "Body Mass Index" and is a standardized measure based on your height and weight. Though it is not perfect, BMI is a useful tool for most people to assess where they fall in terms of the weight categories "ideal," "overweight," and "obese." Higher BMI levels are associated with increased risk of chronic diseases.

The Standard American Diet is one that is very dense in calories—many of them called "empty calories." This means that the foods and beverages are quite low in nutrients compared to the number of calories they have. Sadly, soda and processed foods are staples for most people. Our reliance on these foods, combined with a lack of physical activity, has promoted increased chronic disease rates in our country and around the globe.

Does a vegan diet have its fair share of junk food? Certainly! A trip to the local market reveals new snack foods and frozen dessert treats on practically a weekly basis. Any diet with a backbone of excessive calories from junk rather than whole foods will likely make weight loss a challenge.

Opting for a vegan diet not only benefits your waistline, it's a compassionate choice…

If you are looking to a vegan diet to shed pounds, remember a few things: Eat a diet rich in real foods—vegetables, fruits, legumes, and whole grains. Make sure to include some small amount of whole-food sources of fats, like nuts, avocados, and seeds. Not only will such a diet provide an abundance of fiber to keep you full, but these foods are rich in nutrients to fuel your body. This fuel is needed to energize you during vigorous physical activity, which you should participate in regularly, and is essential to any weight-loss program—not to mention maintaining overall health and well-being.

Opting for a vegan diet not only benefits your waistline, it is a compassionate choice that benefits the animals and the planet.

Q: Can you build muscle on a vegan diet?

A whole-foods vegan diet can provide all the nutritional building blocks your body needs to develop muscle. Several professional athletes have become vegan and optimized their performance. That being said, simply eating a vegan diet is not going to build muscle. The process of muscle building involves fueling your body with adequate, nutritionally packed calories, while participating in regular strength-building exercise.

Protein intake is important, but you do not need to load up like many muscle-bound "meatheads" would lead you to believe. Given that a very active, athletic person requires overall more calories, you would expect the protein intake to also increase. A recommendation of approximately 0.4 - 0.8 grams of protein per pound of body weight should suffice.

Lastly, may I add a comment about the "elephant in the room"? The elephant is an herbivore, as is a gorilla and a cow, all of whom have stellar muscle mass. I rest my case.