


AskAnya



Anya Todd is a vegan registered and licensed dietitian who graduated from Case Western Reserve University and completed her internship at the Cleveland Clinic Foundation. Anya believes everyone should plant a garden - even if that means just having 5 pots of nothing but basil.



Q: *What's your opinion of a raw vegan diet?*

The first time I heard about the concept of raw foods, I was living in Boulder, CO. At the time, I did not give it much thought and shrugged it off as a “hippy fad.” Boy – was I wrong! Ten years later, my local bookstore abounds with a plethora of books about the raw food lifestyle, and restaurants are specializing in the cuisine.

A raw food diet is based on consuming unprocessed foods that have not been heated past 115-120 degrees Fahrenheit. That’s right – no roasted Brussels sprouts allowed! Many raw foodists consume a variety of fruits, vegetables, nuts, avocado, and sprouted grains/legumes – though there are variations of the diet, including those who primarily consume fruit or sprouts or juice. Advocates of this diet believe foods are more nutritious in their raw state, and claim benefits include increased energy, improved digestion and skin condition, weight loss, and decreased risk of disease.

It is true that some food preparation methods destroy nutrients and even create harmful byproducts, like deep-frying. Vitamin C and many of the B-vitamins are water soluble and susceptible to destruction when cooked. Yet, certain nutrients become more available to our bodies after being cooked, like lycopene, an antioxidant found primarily in tomatoes. The reason lycopene is more bioavailable is that the cooking process breaks down the cellular wall of the plant and allows our bodies to absorb more of the antioxidant.

A study recently published in the British Journal of Nutrition showed that nearly 200 subjects following a strict raw food diet had low levels of this particular antioxidant compared to others available in fruits and vegetables. That being said, I feel like proper nutrition requires a synergistic effect of whole foods. Focusing on one particular antioxidant or vitamin in one particular food is a bit silly, if you are eating a variety of foods.

The studies that have been conducted on subjects following a raw food diet have results similar to those of people following a whole food, plant-based diet, which utilizes cooked foods. Results include lower cholesterol levels, decreased weight, and decreased risk of chronic disease like cancer and diabetes. A well-balanced vegan diet should naturally include raw fruits and vegetables as major components of one’s nutritional intake. A daily salad of greens and brightly colored veggies is a powerhouse of fiber, vitamins, minerals and antioxidants. For those devoted to a raw lifestyle, I would encourage you to make sure you have a regular source of vitamin B12 like every other vegan should. Meanwhile, I will continue to enjoy my baked quinoa-stuffed peppers while daydreaming of raw cheesecake from my favorite vegan bakery.

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