

tenderly

‘You’re Vegan?’

10 Most Common Responses to Plant-Based Eating

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1. ‘Where do you get your protein?’

Everyone wants to know where you’re getting your protein, probably because they see the victims of protein deficiency wandering the streets like zombies. Occasionally one of them falls over and their head rolls off. “Oh no!” the people shout. “We’ve lost another innocent to protein deficiency!”

In all seriousness, most people actually sound legitimately curious when they ask this. It’s probably because “Protein!” is advertised on virtually everything at the grocery store from energy bars to cheese. We’re obsessed with it. However, in an unofficial poll conducted by me, 98 percent of people are not counting their macros and have no idea how much protein they eat, or how much they should eat. Turns out, most people are eating plenty. So how much do we *actually* need? The National Academy of Medicine recommends [0.8 grams of protein per kilogram of healthy body weight](#) per day. I weigh 130 lbs, or 59 kg; therefore, I need about 47 grams of protein per day. Curious, I counted my protein on a fairly average day last week and I ate 72 grams of protein. I didn’t eat tofu all day, and I didn’t supplement, that was just how much I ate without thinking about it and without eating animal products¹. And it was about 80 percent more than I need. Pregnant moms need a little extra protein, as do small children and maybe bodybuilders, but if you are eating enough food, you are getting enough protein, whether plant based or not.

Once a coworker asked me where I find this most elusive nutrient, protein, while he was chowing down on a Big Mac. That comical situation underscores the fundamental problem with this question. My coworker, and many Americans, ignore that protein never really shows up by itself. Protein is always in something, and the package that it comes in is probably more important than the protein itself. I’ll take my protein with a healthy serving of fiber (which [97 percent of Americans](#) are not getting enough of) and without the cholesterol and trans fat you find in animal products.

2. ‘You are missing [blank] vital nutrient’

This is a step up from the protein question, because it is somewhat based in reality. A quick google search of “vegan missing nutrient” yields plenty of [scary articles](#), and the general consensus is that you need to watch out for B₁₂, D₃, DHA, and Iron deficiencies. B₁₂ is the only one widely recognized as the vitamin you cannot get from plants except for a few random seaweeds. Everything else you can absorb from plants, and you should. They are also all easily found in supplements. For many of these, omnivores may be deficient too. For example, in the case of D₃, [40 percent of Americans](#) are deficient.

So B₁₂. B₁₂ is important for [neurological function](#), among other things. It is not found in plants, and strict vegans will not get it from their diet without supplements or fortified foods. Omnivores will get B₁₂ from meat and dairy products, as B₁₂ is present in the animals these come from. But wait! If it’s not in plants, how do the herbivores get it? Well, this is sadly a case of humans having an inferior microbiome to ruminants like cows. Cows have bacteria in their [gut that make](#) B₁₂ for them using cobalt that they get from their food (Cobalt is a mineral found in the soil that you need to make B₁₂). However, because soil is often degraded and running low on cobalt, cows may need cobalt or B₁₂ supplements as well. Humans can also make B₁₂ in their gut, but unfortunately the B₁₂ is mostly produced in the large intestine, while it is needed upstream in the small intestine for absorption. Some studies have shown that the B₁₂-[producing bacteria](#) may also be found in the small intestine, so some people may be able to make and absorb their own B₁₂. However, it’s a gamble to assume you have a perfect microbiome. Better to just find a B₁₂ supplement you like.

3. ‘Vegans only eat salads’

Oreos are vegan. I’ll take an Oreo salad to go please.

4. ‘Soy products make men grow boobs and cause breast cancer’

Soy takes a lot of flak. Not only do people think that it causes breast cancer, but they also think it makes men grow boobs because it is allegedly just brimming with estrogen. It’s time to clear soy’s name once and for all. Soy does not contain estrogen — it contains [phytoestrogens](#). Phytoestrogens chemically sort of look like estrogen, but there are many different types. [The phytoestrogens in soy may block the effects of estrogen](#), creating either a protective or neutral effect against breast cancer. Same goes for man boobs.

However, there is a product that does contain the hormone estrogen— cow’s milk. In the United States, cows are usually pregnant when they are producing milk, and their milk contains [estrogen and progesterone](#). These [dietary hormones in cow’s milk](#) have been linked to cancer.

5. 'I only eat grass-fed beef'

First of all, this probably isn't really true. Only around [3 percent of the U.S. beef](#) market is grass fed beef. Most restaurants, fast food places, etc., are not selling grass fed beef. So unless you are exclusively sourcing and preparing your own beef, you have probably eaten some conventional feedlot beef.

More importantly, while grass fed beef eliminates some issues with beef consumption, such as manure pollution and antibiotic use, it's not perfect by any means. It's still an incredibly inefficient way to get calories, around [30 calories in for one calorie out](#). Grass fed cows take more pasture and water because it takes longer to raise them to "finished" weight. If we tried to only use grass fed beef in the United States, we could only raise about [27 percent of the current beef supply](#) on the pasture land that we have. People who are only eating grass fed beef are trying to help, but this will not work for everyone. There simply isn't enough land to do it.

6. 'We are supposed to eat meat'

Things were good back in the old days, when Grok would leave the cave and come back with fresh meat for dinner from his hunt with the boys. Except when Grok didn't come back with meat, because meat can run away. "Sorry babe," Grok says, "I guess it's potatoes for dinner again."

The hunter-gatherers hunted, but they also gathered, and most of them gathered more than they hunted. Modern hunter gatherer groups, like the [Hadza in modern Tanzania](#), get about 70 percent of their calories from plants. Plants are more reliable than hunting, and most tribes have ["fallback foods"](#) like tubers and nuts. In contrast, the Inuit eat 99 percent fish. The cool thing about humans is that we are highly adaptable. Our ancestors ate what they could find. We can thrive on a [variety of diets](#), and that's pretty incredible.

7. 'You are going to waste away'

I lost a little weight when I switched to a plant based diet, but I love it. I feel great. And so do plenty of vegan athletes like Scott Jurek, Rich Roll, David Carter, and Venus Williams. Also, [2/3 of Americans](#) are overweight or obese, so chances are the person making this argument could stand to lose a few pounds.

Losing a little baby fat is not a bad thing, and it happens because plant foods are generally less calorically dense than animal products, with the exception of some high fat foods like nuts and oils. Plant foods also have fiber, which makes you feel more full. So you end up eating a higher quantity of [food with more nutrients and less calories](#), and you can eat as much as you need to feel full without gaining weight. It's pretty awesome.

And if you want to gain weight, it's certainly still possible, and many vegan bodybuilders, like [Nimai Delgado](#), are testaments to that.

8. ‘I could never eat plant-based; I love meat/cheese too much’

People who argue that they “just can’t give up cheese; what about nachos?!” argue that their taste buds are more important than the lives of animals and the health of our planet. As a society, we have become very removed from our food sources. It becomes easy to live with the cognitive dissonance of eating meat while knowing that animal agriculture, with [high speed slaughterhouses](#) and [CAFOs](#) (concentrated animal feeding operations) is frankly messed up. The meat industry is not the idyllic countryside you want to picture. And even if you don’t care about the animals, they still have [enormous environmental implications](#) from water contamination to climate change to antibiotic abuse. But we never experience this in a tangible way, so we keep eating meat. Americans aren’t bad people, but we’ve been thoroughly disconnected with our morals regarding food. This point is illustrated strikingly by a survey that found [47 percent of Americans](#) said that they wanted to ban slaughterhouses, yet 90 percent of Americans eat meat. Hmmm.

To be fair, the stuff does taste good, because it’s salty and fatty and we are hardwired to seek out high calorie foods that will keep us alive. Milk even has mild opiates in it that, when concentrated in cheese, [can be addictive](#). Good news, though! It’s 2020 and vegan options abound. Ben and Jerry’s has [dairy free ice cream](#) now. And [Beyond](#) and [Impossible](#) Burgers can be found at major fast food chains. It’s never been easier to be plant based, and, as a former meat eater, believe me when I say that aligning my food and my conscience tastes so much better than bacon.

9. ‘[Some feeble attempt at a joke about masculinity]’

Alright manly man. When’s the last time you killed and ate your own food? Oh you just pick it up from the grocery store? Very masculine of you. Not to mention [ED is often a warning sign for heart disease](#), which is caused by cholesterol and trans fat that are only found in animal products. So stop eating meat, your penis will thank you.

10. ‘You need milk for strong bones’

Many of us were told repeatedly in grade school that milk “does a body good.” Most of the messaging we received is due to [government checkoffs](#), essentially a tax on dairy that pays for [nationwide advertising](#) of dairy products. In reality, we don’t need milk for strong bones at all. Populations that consume the most dairy also have the most fractures late in life, and [calcium doesn’t](#) necessarily save you from getting osteoporosis; however, exercise might. A 12-year study of adolescent girls did not find any significant difference in bone density or fracture rates with higher rates of calcium intake. In a study of post-menopausal women, [neither milk nor calcium](#) appeared to reduce risk of bone fractures or osteoporosis. So no matter your age, milk doesn’t seem to be important for health. However, if you are really concerned about getting calcium, [dark leafy greens](#) have plenty of it.

Footnotes

1. This was my protein breakdown that day:

Breakfast

Oatmeal: 5g
Chia seeds: 2 g
Peanut butter: 3.5g
Almond milk: 1g
Banana: 1.5 g

Lunch and snacks

Pasta (Barilla Protein +, 1.5 servings): 15g
Trader Joe's Vegan Kale Pesto (so good!): 2g
Hummus: 5g
Triscuits: 6g
Carrots: 1g

Dinner

Tofu: 20g
Brussel sprouts: 6g
Sweet Potatoes: 4g

Total daily protein: 72 grams



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