9 Spas That Can Change Your Life

Down-Home Dumplings

7 Days of Low-Fat Meals

Raising Your Kids Vegetarian

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Features

32  7 Days of Low-Fat Meals
   Dinner's a snap with our low-fat, healthy menus—just take the shopping list and go.

42  Dumplings For Dinner
   Whether you call 'em pieroges or wontons, these doughy delights are the universal comfort food.

80  It’s Easy Being Green
   Cruelty-free, eco-friendly, clothing and products that won’t cramp your sense of style.

90  Mud, Massage, and Mastery
   Nine spa retreats that can help you relax, recharge, and teach you a new way of living.

For the Kids

48  It’s in the Bag!
   Dozens of hints for packing lunches your kid is guaranteed not to toss or trade.

54  Answering Machine
   Getting veg meals into your school’s cafeteria.

58  Natural Remedies
   Holistic help for ear infections.

62  The Herbalist
   Treating childhood ailments with gentle teas, tinctures, and aromatherapy.

69  Into the Mouths of Babes
   The straight dish on why our children should be raised vegetarian.

On the Cover

114  Dining Out
   Zen and the art of Korean cuisine.

128  Last Morsel
   The link between health and wealth.

Departments

16  News
   Is MSG lurking in your soup?  B vitamins for memory loss  •  Flea-free pets  •  Would you like tempeh with that?

26  New Vegetarian
   Red or white wine with pad thai?  Learn the rules with our wine-matching guide.

30  Low-fat and Fast
   This hearty Spanish soup features spinach, chickpeas, and saffron.

76  Recipe Redux
   Got hash?

100  Body Basics
   The pros and cons of natural hair color.

106  Traveling Fare
   Nashville serves up more than corn pone and country music.

110  Kathy’s Kitchen
   Tempt your taste buds with ginger.

In Every Issue

6  From the Editors
8  Letters
12  Shopping Around
69  Bookshelf
123  Classifieds
127  Recipe Index

Reader Services

Next Issue

Instant Meals
   Eight great meals that practically make themselves.

Flavorful Breads
   Sweet and savory breads you’ll eat straight from the oven.

Turning Back the Clock
   A special report on the anti-aging revolution.

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God Bless Dr. Spock.

The legacy of the late Benjamin Spock, M.D., foremost authority on all things parental, won't just be the no-nonsense information he dispensed for 40 years to nervous moms and dads. No, America's favorite pediatrician will also be remembered for sparking one heck of a debate on the health benefits of a vegetarian diet for children.

Before his death in March 1998 at age 94, the good doctor revised the seventh edition of his definitive Dr. Spock's Baby and Childcare (Pocket Books, 1998), a book outsold only by the Bible. Among his final words: Rear children on a plant-based diet devoid of dairy products after the age of 2.

Spock, who recovered from chronic bronchitis after adopting a vegetarian diet himself at 88, had come to believe that if children did the same, they would be less likely to develop weight problems and contemporary lifestyle diseases like heart disease, diabetes, high blood pressure, and cancer. He also believed that meat and dairy don't provide optimal nutrition for children and that they actually aggravate many childhood ailments, such as ear infections, digestive disorders, and respiratory problems. "Research shows us very clearly that vegetables, grains, beans, and fruits should take center stage," Spock wrote. "They provide the nutrition children need to grow and avoid the cholesterol and animal fat that can cause so many problems. My siblings and I were given no red meat until we were 12 years of age, and we were all healthy. We should have continued to avoid meat through adolescence and adulthood."

For vegetarians, this was welcome, if unsurprising news. After all, the benefits of a meat-free lifestyle for people, animals, and the environment have been known in this country for decades. A rich collection of studies have demonstrated that vegetarians do live longer and have significantly reduced risks of major diseases and obesity. Prominent physicians like Dean Ornish, Charles Attwood, and Neil Barnard have all publicly promoted the health advantages of a plant-based diet.

But coming from Spock, it was different. This was America's most trusted baby guru encouraging everyone to jump on the bandwagon bound for good health. At last, it seemed, the debate over meatless eating was over. Going veg was the most important step parents could take to safeguard their children's long-term health. Thus spake Dr. Spock.

Then came the fireworks.

Within two weeks of the book's publication in June of 1998, The New York Times ran two articles debunking Spock's advice, calling it hazardous to children. Members of the conventional medical community lined up to shoot down his recommendations. "Absolutely insane," T. Terry Brazelton, M.D., railed in the Times when asked to comment. A prominent child behavior specialist with Boston City Hospital, Brazelton adamantly insisted that meat and dairy are critical for childhood development. Michael Georgess, M.D., professor of pediatrics and child development at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis echoed that sentiment, warning that kids faced "very significant risks." Johanna Dwyer, a nutrition expert at Tuft-New England Medical Center in Boston, added, "We should be sticking to dietary changes that have demonstratable health benefits, like those outlined in the [U.S. Department of Agriculture's] food pyramid."

By Norine Dworkin

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As the controversy raged, all the old, familiar misconceptions about vegetarianism got a fresh airing: That meat and dairy are essential for good health; a vegetarian diet doesn’t provide the nutrients children require; meatless cooking is a hassle; and kids won’t eat a vegetarian diet because they don’t like the food and fear being different from their peers.

Since classically trained physicians receive almost no formal nutrition training, they cling to those outdated views. (Of the 125 accredited U.S. medical schools, just 32 require students to take nutrition courses; and another 50 offer it as an elective.)

As science helps us to better understand the role that food plays in health and longevity, these misconceptions are slowly going the way of the rotary dial phone. The American Dietetic Association supports a vegetarian diet for children. So does the National Academy of Sciences and the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine. We are indebted to Dr. Spock for the opportunity to restate the facts about the nutritional soundness—and life-long health benefits—of a vegetarian diet for children. So here we go, once again, from the top.

Misconception #1: Children need animal products.

No, they don’t. Meat and dairy products may be cornerstones of the standard American diet, but that doesn’t mean they’re good for us. Meat is a source of protein, necessary for muscle and tissue growth. But meat also contains a lot of things that kids should do without: steroids, hormones, antibiotics, not to mention high levels of saturated fat and cholesterol (meat is the leading source of saturated fat in the American diet). The same is true of dairy products. A significant source of calcium, they, too, come with high levels of saturated fat and cholesterol—milk is the second leading source of saturated fat—and contains antibiotics, pesticides, and hormones. "These are all known health hazards," says Richard DeAndrea, M.D., medical director for California Universal Healthcare, a complementary health clinic in Los Angeles. "They are chemical constituents that disrupt the body’s immune system and hormonal balance."

Growth hormones used in dairy and meat production, says DeAndrea, are associated with declining age of menstruation (150 years ago, girls menstruated at 17; today they begin at 11), which in turn has been linked with increased rates of breast cancer. "We’re seeing this drop in the onset age of puberty in industrialized nations," he added. "But we don’t see it in Third World nations, where people don’t consume as much meat and dairy and they can’t afford to administer hormones to their animals." Stacks of studies have also linked dairy to lactose intolerance, allergies, asthma, digestive problems, diabetes, migraine headaches, and, ironically, osteoporosis.

What gets lost in the debate about whether meat and dairy do a body good is that they are neither the best—nor only—sources of these nutrients. Plant proteins contain all the amino acids required to make up a complete protein, according to a 1990 report in the American Journal of Clinical Nutrition. And dark leafy greens, such as kale, bok choy, and broccoli, contain as much absorbable calcium as milk—without the fat, cholesterol, or harmful additives.

Provided that they get adequate calories and a good balance of fruits and vegetables, grains, legumes, and soy products, kids do just fine on a meatless diet. Research done at Kings College in London, and published in the journal Pediatric Clinics of North America (August 1995), found "higher than average intelligence quotients" among vegetarian children. The China Oxford Cornell Project on Diet, Lifestyle, and Disease Characteristics, a wide-spectrum population study conducted in Taiwan since 1983, demonstrated that while no Chinese girls raised on vegan (no animal products) diet mature more slowly than American girls, they do develop to their full expected potential. And a study done by the Centers for Disease Control, published in the journal Pediatrics (September 1989), indicates that vegetarian children are leaner than their meat-eating counterparts by about two and a half pounds, owing to the low levels of saturated fat in a plant-based diet.

Our high-fat, high-cholesterol eating habits have left a wake of health calamities. Recent government statistics say one-half the American adult population is overweight. Heart disease is the No. 1 killer in America claiming nearly 2 million lives a year. Adult-onset (Type II) diabetes affects some 16 million Americans and causes 187,000 deaths annually. Breast and colon cancers (both diet-related) are expected to take 43,500 and 47,700 lives this year respectively.

These are grim statistics, and as the next generation matures, we can look forward to more of the same. Gorging on burgers, chicken nuggets, fries, and shakes, today’s children have ballooned into the heaviest of history. The National Center for Health Statistics reports that 10 percent of 4- and 5-year old girls were overweight as of 1994, the last year for which statistics were available, compared with 5.8 percent in 1974. The numbers are even higher for 6- to 11-year olds: 13.6 percent overweight as of 1994, compared with 5.5 percent in 1974. The Bogalusa Heart Study, a 25-year study conducted by Louisiana State University in New Orleans, confirmed that fatty deposits from saturated fat and cholesterol that lead to heart disease form in arteries by age 3.

"We’ve done the Great American Experiment on our children," adds Michael Klapper, M.D., author of pregnancy, Children and a Vegan Diet (Gentle World, Inc., 1998). "We’ve seen what a high-fat diet combined with a sedentary lifestyle creates. We have the fattest generation of children in history, with all the implications of early disease and death that it implies. Fostering animal-based diets as part of our children’s food habits is the proverbial deal with the devil. Considering the health hazards of a meat-based diet, a plant-based..."