

THE RISE AND RISE OF VEGANISM



In recent years, there has been a remarkable and undeniable surge in the popularity of veganism. What was once considered a niche lifestyle choice has now become a global phenomenon with profound implications for health, the environment and ethics. This article explores the factors driving the rise of veganism, its impact on various aspects of society and the future trajectory of this plant-based revolution.

The term 'veganism' was first coined in 1944 by Donald Watson, the founder of the Vegan Society, as a response to the growing interest in vegetarianism. Veganism distinguishes itself from vegetarianism by excluding all animal-derived products, including meat, dairy, eggs and honey.¹ Over the decades, veganism has been primarily embraced by individuals with strong ethical convictions against animal exploitation. However, more recently, veganism has become much more 'trendy' as evidenced by the following statistics:

- In 2020, it was reported that 9.7 million Americans were plant-based, which was a 300% increase in 15 years.²
- The Veganuary campaign, where individuals adopt a vegan diet throughout January, achieved record-breaking participation in 2023, as more than 700,000 people worldwide signed up. In contrast, the numbers were significantly lower in previous years: 692,000 participants in 2022, 582,000 in 2021, 400,000 in 2020, 250,000 in 2019, 168,500 in 2018, 59,500 in 2017, 23,000 in 2016, 12,800 in 2015, and 3300 in 2014.³
- In 2023, Google Trends indicated that Germany led the world in searches related to veganism, with Austria and the UK following suit.⁴
- The Good Food Institute reported that global sales of plant-based meat products reached \$6.1 billion in 2022.⁵
- According to Neff et al (2018), two in three Americans surveyed reduced or stopped eating meat.⁶
- A global survey conducted by Rakuten in 2021 revealed that 81% of consumers had experimented with plant-based milk, 48% with other dairy alternatives, 44% with vegan meat substitutes and 25% with vegan egg replacements.⁷
- According to a 2021 global survey by NSF, 88% of food industry professionals anticipated an increased



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REFERENCES

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demand for plant-based products. Of those surveyed, 74% believed that consumers choose plant-based options for health reasons, while 60% thought it was because of their perceived environmental benefits.⁸

- Google searches for 'vegan food near me' have skyrocketed, with a more than 5000% increase in 2021.⁹
- In 2020, *Vegonomist* magazine projected that the market for vegan 'leather' products would reach nearly \$90 billion by 2025.¹⁰

HEALTH AND WELLNESS

One of the primary drivers behind the rise of veganism is a growing awareness of the health benefits associated with a plant-based diet. Research has consistently shown that vegan diets can have a positive impact on overall health and well-being. A 2019 review found that a vegan diet can lower the risk of heart disease, stroke and type 2 diabetes.¹¹ Additionally, veganism is associated with lower cholesterol levels, reduced blood pressure and healthier body weight.¹² Vegan diets have also been linked to a reduced risk of all cancer incidence.¹³ As people become more conscious of their health and seek to prevent lifestyle-related illnesses, the appeal of a vegan diet as a means of achieving better health has grown significantly.

ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERNS

Another compelling factor driving the rise of veganism is growing concern about environmental sustainability. The production of animal-based foods, especially meat and dairy, is associated with a significant environmental footprint. Livestock farming contributes to deforestation, greenhouse gas emissions and the depletion of natural resources, including water and land. Godfray et al (2018) warn that if global meat consumption continues to rise, it could have catastrophic consequences for the planet's ecosystems and climate.¹⁴

In contrast, plant-based diets have been praised for their lower environmental impact. In 2019, the EAT-Lancet Commission recommended a global shift towards diets that are primarily plant-based to mitigate the environmental challenges posed by food production.¹⁵ As people become more aware of the link between their dietary choices and environmental degradation,

many are choosing veganism as a way to reduce their carbon footprint and contribute to a more sustainable future.

ANIMAL WELFARE

Veganism is fundamentally rooted in ethical considerations regarding the treatment of animals. Advocates argue that the exploitation and suffering of animals in the food industry are morally unacceptable. The rise of social media and digital information sharing has exposed the public to the harsh realities of factory farming and animal cruelty, leading to increased empathy and outrage.

High-profile documentaries like *Earthlings* and *Cowspiracy* have shed light on the dark side of animal agriculture, pushing many individuals to reconsider their dietary choices. Activist organisations, such as PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals), have played a crucial role in raising awareness about animal cruelty in the food industry. Consequently, more people are embracing veganism as a way to align their values with their dietary choices and reduce their contribution to the suffering of animals.

VEGAN INDUSTRY

The surge in veganism has not only led to a change in consumer behaviour but has also created a thriving vegan industry. This industry encompasses a wide range of products, from plant-based meat substitutes to dairy-free cheeses and cruelty-free cosmetics. Companies like Beyond Meat and Impossible Foods have gained prominence for their innovative plant-based meat alternatives, whilst established food giants have introduced their vegan product lines.

The global market for plant-based foods is expanding rapidly. A report by Grand View Research estimated that the global plant-based food market was valued at \$16.55 billion in 2022. It is projected to grow at a compound annual growth rate of 10.7% from 2023 to 2030. This growth reflects the increasing demand for vegan options in restaurants, grocery stores and fast-food chains.¹⁶

VEGANISM'S IMPACT ON SOCIETY

Changing dietary norms: The rise of veganism has challenged traditional dietary norms and influenced mainstream food culture. Many



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restaurants and food establishments now offer vegan menu options to cater to the growing demand. Additionally, veganism has contributed to the diversification of food choices, promoting the consumption of a wider variety of plant-based foods.

Innovation and research: The surge in veganism has led to increased investment in research and development of plant-based products. This has spurred innovation in the food industry, resulting in improved vegan options that closely mimic the taste and texture of animal-based products. For instance, plant-based burgers that ‘bleed’ like real meat have become a popular choice among both vegans and omnivores.

Healthier populations: As more people adopt vegan diets, there is the potential for a healthier population with reduced rates of diet-related diseases. This could alleviate the burden on healthcare systems and reduce healthcare costs associated with chronic illnesses.

Reduced environmental impact: A shift towards plant-based diets could significantly reduce the environmental impact of food production, helping to mitigate climate change, conserve natural resources and protect biodiversity.

Ethical considerations: The rise of veganism has spurred important conversations about ethics and animal welfare. It has also prompted changes in food production practices, with

some companies adopting more humane and sustainable methods.

THE FUTURE OF VEGANISM

The future of veganism appears promising, with several trends and developments suggesting continued growth and influence. Technological advances in food technology, such as cellular agriculture and 3D printing of plant-based foods, are expected to yield even more realistic and sustainable vegan options. These innovations could further bridge the gap between animal-based and plant-based products.¹⁷

As veganism becomes more mainstream, it is likely to become a normalised dietary choice rather than a niche lifestyle. This shift will continue to drive the development of vegan products and increase their availability. Governments and regulatory bodies are beginning to recognise the importance of promoting plant-based diets for health and environmental reasons. Policy changes, such as subsidies for plant-based agriculture and stricter regulations on animal farming practices, could further support the growth of veganism.

Cultural norms surrounding food and dietary choices are evolving too. The younger generation in particular is more open to plant-based diets and is likely to drive the continued growth of veganism.¹⁸ In conclusion, the rise of veganism represents a profound shift in dietary choices, driven by concerns about health, the environment and animal welfare and it doesn't look like it's going to slow down any time soon.