Ideas for Teaching Students and Interns about Vegetarian and Vegan Diets

Many DPD and CP programs incorporate information about vegetarian and vegan diets into various courses including introductory nutrition, life-cycle nutrition, medical nutrition therapy, sports nutrition, community nutrition/public health, food science/food principles, advanced nutrition.

Dietetic internships may offer opportunities including working with individual vegetarians and vegans in in-patient and out-patient settings, working with or observing non-profit vegetarian or vegan organizations, developing materials for vegetarians or vegans, and working with dining facilities that provide vegetarian and vegan meals (e.g. senior meals, schools, colleges and universities, employee cafeterias, hospital cafeterias).

In classroom settings case studies can be developed with vegetarian or vegan individuals. While it may be tempting to use these case studies to illustrate nutrient deficiencies, they should also be used to demonstrate the benefits of a vegetarian or vegan diet. For example, provide a case study of someone pre- and post-bypass surgery who has a high fat, high saturated fat, high cholesterol diet prior to surgery and then decides to eat a much healthier vegan diet.

When discussing food sources of nutrients, be sure to include vegetarian and vegan foods. These foods are often the dried beans, whole grains, vegetables and fruits we’d like to see everyone eating more of!

Challenge students to develop menus for vegetarians or vegans that are nutritionally adequate. They may need to include some less familiar foods or use more mixed or international dishes.

Bring in examples of vegan and vegetarian foods. Discuss taste, nutritional quality, cost, audience. Not every food marketed to vegetarians is a healthy food. Encourage your students to use critical thinking skills. Compare some of these foods to similar non-vegetarian foods. For example, how does fortified soymilk or pea protein milk compare to cow’s milk?

Students in foods or food science classes can modify recipes that contain meat, fish, poultry, dairy products or eggs to make the recipes vegan. Try different replacements for eggs in muffins or use plant-based milks to make cream soups.

Include discussions of recent research related to vegetarian and vegan nutrition in courses such as advanced nutrition, medical nutrition therapy, and life-cycle nutrition as well as during clinical rotations in dietetic internships. Vegetarian Journal and Vegetarian Nutrition Update (see resource list) both feature updates on recent research related to vegetarian nutrition.

Encourage students and interns to seek out answers to their questions about vegetarian and vegan nutrition. This provides an opportunity to discuss reliable sources of information. Are they using evidence-based materials or relying on questionable websites and texts?

Upper level or graduate students or dietetic interns can read popular books, websites or consumer articles related to vegetarian and vegan diets and then critically evaluate the content of these resources. Which ones provide sound nutritional information? Which ones are selling products? Which ones are making unsubstantiated claims?

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Ideas for Working with Vegetarian and Vegan Students and Interns

Vegetarian and vegan students and interns can provide a wealth of information based on their experience. They can help their peers appreciate the foods that vegetarians and vegans eat and often are knowledgeable about nutrition issues related to their dietary choices.

Support these students and interns as they bring a vegetarian or vegan voice to group projects. For example, if a group is developing a presentation on dietary modifications in diabetes, a part of the project could include use of a vegetarian or vegan diet in diabetes treatment.

Realistically, most program graduates are not going to have a first job where their sole focus is vegetarian or vegan nutrition. Students and interns may need to be reminded that they do need to know about non-vegetarian sources of nutrients, food safety issues for both vegetarians and non-vegetarians, and medical nutrition therapy for non-vegetarians.

Determine how your program will handle vegetarian and vegan students’ participation in food labs or food-service experiences that involve preparation of meat or other non-vegetarian foods. In my opinion, vegetarians and vegans should not be required to eat meat or other foods that are not included in their diet. Some programs will require them to participate in food preparation without eating the food since they need to be aware of food preparation techniques. Other programs allow students to modify recipes so that they are preparing vegetarian or vegan versions.

Vegetarian and vegan students and interns can be useful resources but may need encouragement to evaluate the sources of their information. Point students and interns towards reliable sources of information. Promote the development of critical thinking skills.

Help students and interns to find opportunities to volunteer with or observe vegetarian and vegan non-profit organizations and to seek out mentors who work with vegetarians and vegans.

Encourage students and interns to join and be active in the Vegetarian Nutrition Dietetic Practice Group (https://vndpg.org/). This DPG offers many resources and opportunities for students and interns to network and be mentored.

Discuss ethical issues with students and interns. For example, “If you're a Registered Dietitian and you personally are a vegetarian, would you work for a large steak producing company who wants YOU to promote and sell their new line of veggie burgers?” and “Would you promote a soy milk from a company that is owned by someone in the dairy industry?” and “Would it ever be appropriate to tell a vegetarian family that their children had to eat meat?” and “How would you advise a vegetarian family whose 12-year old wants to begin eating meat?”

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Resources for Teaching Students and Interns about Vegetarian and Vegan Diets

Books and Book Chapters


Vegetarian Nutrition and Wellness edited by Winston J. Craig, PhD, RD; 2018, CRC Press


Becoming Vegan, Comprehensive Edition by Brenda Davis, RD and Vesanto Melina, MS, RD; 2014, Book Publishing Company


Pediatric vegetarianism by Reed Mangels, PhD, RD in Life Cycle Nutrition. An Evidence-based Approach, 2nd edition by S. Edelstein; 2015, Jones and Bartlett Learning

Websites

The Vegetarian Resource Group www.vrg.org This extensive website provides nutrition information, client education materials, recipes, ingredient information, and much more.

Vegetarian Nutrition Dietetic Practice Group (some materials are only available to members) www.vndpg.org RD Resources (fact sheets) on many topics for professionals and consumers.

Vegan Health www.veganhealth.org Created and maintained by RDs.

The Vegan RD www.theveganrd.com Consumer-friendly information from a widely-published RD.


Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics – both the Nutrition Care Manual and the Evidence Analysis have sections on vegetarian diets available to subscribers


Publications


Vegetarian Nutrition Update – quarterly publication of the Vegetarian Nutrition DPG. Back issues are available in the members’ section of the website.

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