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DIET TRENDS

Good, bad and yummy

Lecturer at UNSW and nutritionist Dr Rebecca Reynolds says it's worth looking at plant-based food — and cross-referencing restrictive diets with evidence-based research.

"There's no way that's 100 per cent (right) — there are positives and negatives," Reynolds says.

Trying more plant-based dishes can be a good approach to healthy eating, but Reynolds advises against extreme diets.

"They do have such wonderful bases — they just take it too far, with some weird tweaks that aren't based on science," she says.

Here is her verdict on some current trends.

Juicing

Juicing has become a more mainstream plant-based dietary trend, with wild claims about its health benefits. Reynolds says anything offering a "detox" is bogus, as the liver actually removes toxins.

"You can't detox your body," she says, but adds you can lighten the liver's load by making other lifestyle changes. "You don't have alcohol, smoke, don't take paracetamol. Eat loads of fibre — insoluble and soluble — so fruits, vegetables and oats. That would get your gut moving, and is the way forward."

Reynolds advises smoothies — which blend whole fruits and vegetables — as a better option.

"Juices take out fibre — and your body likes to chew to feel full properly. If you find it hard to get your recommended intake of veggies, smoothies where you add protein, like yoghurt, can be a good meal on the go, but I'd rather people eat solid food."

Vegetarian

Reynolds herself is a vegetarian, but she says the choice requires some dietary vigilance.

"Vegetarianism and veganism is not ideal nutritionally, because we evolved to eat meat.

"However, in the modern environment, we've got nutritional medicine and fortification. I am a well-nourished vegetarian, because I take supplements, and eat things fortified with iron, zinc and B12. But if I lived in the Dark Ages, it would probably not be a good thing to do — I'd eat meat," she says, adding that a day a week of plant-based eating is an option.

"Going meat free, if it means people reduce the kinds of meat, like bacon, salami and the more fatty meats — then that's a good thing."

Vegan

Vegan diets, according to Reynolds, present similar nutritional challenges as vegetarianism.

"There's even more risks for malnutrition, but you can take supplements. Nutritionally, you've got to be careful, but it's totally manageable.

"Ethically, I just think it can be wonderful for the environment and for animals; I think it's great to care about the world," she says, adding that there are many sources of protein in a vegan diet.

"You can get lots of plant proteins, and legumes and tofu and soy milk — but it's the micronutrients that are the main problem because animal foods are associated with certain micronutrients like iron and B12, so unless someone's really careful, they should probably take a supplement as a vegan."

Vegan Raw

Reynolds says while there are positive elements of a raw vegan diet, it can be restrictive, with only some aspects of the dietary choice supported by science.

"The reason some people have done raw is because the heat does destroy some vitamins that are affected by heat, like vitamin C, but you're still going to get some vitamin C," she says. "There definitely is (some science behind a raw diet), but sometimes cooking, instead of ruining food, just makes it digestible. It kills bacteria and can increase some nutrients like beta carotene. When it comes to vegan raw desserts, it's not a free pass to indulge either. Sometimes they can be pure sugar and fat."

Dr Rebecca Reynolds is a lecturer at UNSW and a nutritionist, therealbokchoy.com