

Vegans could be increasing risk of dementia by avoiding fats which protect the brain, nutritionist warns

By Sarah Knapton, SCIENCE EDITOR
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Stylized anatomical model of the human brain | CREDIT: Science Picture Co

Vegans and vegetarians may be putting themselves at increased risk of mental health problems and dementia because important chemicals which protect the brain are mainly found [in meat, fish and eggs, a nutritionist has suggested.](#)

Max Lugavere, author of the book *Genius Foods*, said it was wrong to think of animal products as unhealthy because they have such a significant impact on brain health.

Speaking at the Biohacker Summit in Helsinki, he also warned that eggs had been unfairly demonised even though they contain choline, which has been shown to lower dementia risk by nearly 30 per cent.




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“Eggs have been demonised over the past 50 years by so many of our governments,” he said.

“Eggs are a genius food. It’s crucial to remember that when an embryo is developing the first structure that is assembled is the nervous system which includes the brain and so an egg yolk literally has everything that nature has deemed important to grow a health brain. So if you’re just eating the egg whites you’re missing out on a world of nutrition.

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“Egg yolks are a wonderful source of choline, and new research is coming out of everyday showing the importance of choline to brain health.

“In one study of choline, they found men who were in the highest tier of choline consumption had 28 per cent risk reduced over 22 years, there is no drug that can do that.

“Choline is really important and it’s also concentrated in animal products, so one egg yolk has about 25 per cent of your daily requirement. It’s found in vegetables but at much smaller amounts, so this is a really interesting study for anyone who believes animal products are inherently unhealthy. If they were inherently unhealthy, you wouldn’t see effects like this.”

[Mr Lugavere, who began researching the best foods for brain health](#) after his mother was diagnosed with dementia aged just 58, also advised eating fish, such as salmon and red meat regularly.

“Documentaries are coming out on Netflix all the time talking about how unhealthy meat is, but red meat is a great source of what the brain needs for energy,” he said.

“In randomised controlled trials when you take people who do not consume red meat, vegans and vegetarians, and you give them creatine as a supplement, the vegans and vegetarians have an improvement in their memory.

“So red meat is very important. It’s the most highest source of iron you can find and it’s also important for mental health.

Which vegan tribe are you?

The vegangelist: The leather-shunning, honey-dodging bona fide vegan, who can occasionally be a tad evangelistic about their beliefs.

The flegan: Like a flexitarian, a flegan is a flexible or part-time vegan who has vegan beliefs, mostly shuns animal produce, but gets waylaid by the occasional roast dinner.

The seagan: Vegans who eat seafood (*sea-gan*, get it?) The term appeared in the Urban Dictionary back in 2007 but was largely unheard-of until recently, when several books on seaganism were published. Fans point out that, ethical issues aside, fish and seafood are full of iron, vitamin B12 and vitamin D.

The pegan: Peganism is the lovechild of veganism and the paleo diet. The latter involves grass-fed meat, nuts and seeds, seafood, eggs and fresh vegetables and fruit, while shunning grains and dairy. But while the meat-heavy paleo diet seems at odds with veganism, the term pegan was coined by Dr Mark Hyman, an American physician and best-selling author, who argues they overlap well. A pegan diet involves 75 per cent plants, with some meat and animal products (but no dairy), along with limited beans, legumes and gluten-free grains.

“Research has found women who did not consume the national recommendation of three to four servings of red meat per week were twice as likely to be diagnosed with mood disorder. So some is better than none.”

Mr Lugavere also said it was important to use full-fat dressings on foods such a kale, because the body struggles to absorb nutrients, when they are not accompanied by fat.

He also advised eating avocados, almonds, extra virgin olive oil and cruciferous vegetables such as broccoli, cauliflower, radishes, as well as dark chocolate and mushrooms, and exercising regularly.

“Too often we reach for pills when just going to the gym is such a powerful intervention, that should really be our first line of defence,” he said.

Teemu Arina, founder of the Biohacker Summit and author the Biohackers Handbook said: “It’s about optimising your life to become a better, more optimised version of yourself, based on guidance from latest science and practitioners in the field.

“It’s not about better, faster, stronger although the Americans would like to tell you, or taking all kinds of supplements and cranking yourself up.

“Most of the effective biohacks are about understanding our relationship to the environment. My target is not to live forever but live a good life and leave a contribution. We have disconnected ourselves from nature and it’s time to reconnect.”

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