

# Vegan and well-informed

Cookery books with vegan recipes, blogs on the subject and animal-free supermarkets – vegan diets are en vogue. If you cut out animal products completely, however, you run the risk of an undersupply of certain nutrients. To guarantee efficient risk communication, the BfR questioned vegans about their levels of knowledge and attitudes.

© StudioPhotoFlorez/shutterstock.com

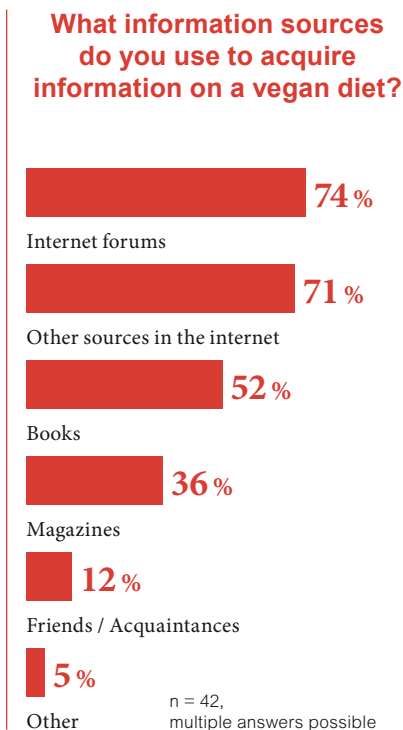


In 2016, there were 0.8 million people among the German-speaking population of Germany aged 14 years and over who described themselves as vegan or as someone who largely avoids animal-based products (2016, Allensbacher Markt- und Werbeträger-Analyse, IfD Allensbach). Several studies show that a vegan diet can have a positive influence on health, such as a reduced risk of Type 2 diabetes. Health risks due to nutrient deficiencies are also described, however, for groups like pregnant women and children. People who do not consume any animal products run the risk of a deficiency of vitamin B12, iron, calcium, iodine and zinc, as well as long-chain Omega 3 fatty acids.

Against this backdrop, the BfR aims to develop suitable risk communication strategies. One research project was dedicated to the individual and social influencing factors which lead to the motivation to switch to and maintain a vegan diet. With the help of focus group interviews, a total of 42 vegans were surveyed on their values, attitudes and opinions. As these deviate quite severely from those of the average population in some cases, some generalised statements can be made, but the survey data is not representative.

## Ethical decision

Vegans almost always base their decision to adopt a vegan diet on ethical arguments; health motives are hardly ever mentioned. Most respondents do not belong to any religious confession and have an above-average level of education. In addition to this,



vegetarianism influences the decision to become a vegan. Two thirds of the participants were already vegetarians before they became vegans. The decision to switch to a vegan diet can be made all the easier if people close to them have already done so. The vast majority of respondents cannot envisage switching back to an omnivorous diet which permits animal products. Even pregnancy is not usually regarded as a reason to do so and children are often brought up on a vegan diet too. The respondents stated that their social environment often

responds with scepticism and aversion. To prevent their children from becoming social outcasts, some of the respondents permit compromises by allowing the children to choose by themselves whether or not to eat animal products when not at home, for example.

## Knowledge getting through

People who choose a vegan diet usually have sound knowledge of nutrition. 40 of the 42 participants of the BfR study, for example, were aware that a vitamin B12 deficiency can result without animal products. Many of them take this vitamin as a supplement. When looking for information about all aspects of a vegan diet, the internet is the most important source of information (see chart).

## Risk communication strategy

Some important link-up points for risk communication emerged in the course of the survey. Among other things, it became clear that a negative approach presenting a vegan diet as dangerous or abnormal can only have limited success. Effective risk communication should pick up on vegans' existing convictions with the goal of giving concrete tips for everyday life which can be combined with a vegan diet. Information on how a possible nutrient deficiency can be prevented with a vegan diet is fundamentally promising. Comprehensive information should be provided in particular with regard to alternatives or supplementation during pregnancy and with infants and young children. ■