

# GOING VEGAN

## MYTH vs REALITY

Veganism divides opinion among cyclists, with fiery views on both sides. Sports nutritionist Anita Bean pours some cooling impartiality on the overheated debate

A plethora of plant-based proteins can be found on your local supermarket shelves

**E**ATING A vegan diet has become increasingly popular over recent years. Within the cycling community, there are passionate proponents as well as diehard sceptics. Mention the 'V' word on social media and you'll provoke a lively – if not inflammatory – debate about the merits and harms of a plant-only diet. Naysayers will be quick to cite a story of a rider who became unwell on a vegan diet before switching back to eating animal products. On the other side, vegans will

extol the ethical, environmental, health and performance benefits. How to take a balanced view?

Admittedly, it's hard not to be biased by your own food preferences. To declare my own position: I am a vegetarian and I recently published a vegan cookbook. This feature is not designed to persuade you for or against; my objective is to help cyclists thinking about going vegan to weigh up the pros and cons. A survey conducted by researchers at the University of Bath found that the three biggest perceived drawbacks putting people off going vegan are taste, price and convenience. In this feature, we dissect six common myths about going vegan and speak to pro riders who've made the switch.

**'A VEGAN DIET DOES NOT PROVIDE ALL THE NUTRIENTS THAT CYCLISTS NEED'**

This is perhaps the most common concern among cyclists considering a vegan diet. Many plant-based foods are lower in protein, or lacking complete proteins. But this isn't an insurmountable problem. "With proper planning, cyclists on a vegan diet can easily get enough protein," explains registered dietitian Azmina Govindji, author of *Vegan Savvy*. "The key is to include a wide variety of different sources throughout the day."

Plant proteins include legumes (beans, lentils, chickpeas, peas and peanuts), soya products (tofu, tempeh, soya milk

alternative), grains (pasta, rice, oats and bulgur wheat), quinoa, nuts and seeds. Recent studies have dispelled the theory that plant proteins are inferior to animal proteins for muscle building. A review of nine studies published in the *International Journal of Sport and Exercise Metabolism* showed that soya protein supplementation produced similar gains in strength and muscle mass when compared against whey protein.



Shaw: "It's as healthy as you make it"

"Like any diet it's as unhealthy as you make it," says 25-year-old pro rider James Shaw, who has been vegan for two years and is stepping up to the WorldTour next year, having signed for EF Education-Nippo. "Yes, if you eat Skittles and drink Coca-

Cola all day, you will be on an unhealthy vegan diet.

"But if you adopt a healthy vegan approach of eating plenty of colours of fruit and veg and getting a balance of all different foods, it generally will be as good as anything else."

The only micronutrient that you can't get from plant foods is vitamin B12, but most plant milk alternatives have B12 added to them, as do yeast extract and nutritional yeast flakes. Alternatively, taking a daily supplement containing 10 micrograms will safeguard against deficiency. Additionally, you may need to obtain iodine from a supplement, as it is found in only very few plant foods (i.e. seaweed).

**'GOING VEGAN WILL TRANSFORM MY CYCLING PERFORMANCE'**

A growing number of vegan pro cyclists provide compelling anecdotal evidence that you can compete at the highest level without eating animal products. Retired pro Adam Hansen believes that going plant-based benefited his performance. "I felt great and had an amazing recovery. I did 20 Grand Tours in a row without ever being sick or ill. These are three-week-long races, three times a year competing against the best athletes in the world."

However, not everyone notices a transformative improvement in their performance. "I can't point to any specific performance benefits that I experienced," admits 21-year-old cyclo-cross star Cameron Mason (Trinity Racing). "My diet changed gradually over the course of my teenage years when I was also growing and developing. I can say it did not have any negative effects on my bike riding or life."

The truth is that no studies have yet examined whether a vegan diet improves performance – it would be very difficult to separate out the variables. There is no evidence that going vegan puts you at a performance disadvantage, but scientists don't know with certainty whether a vegan diet is, from a sporting perspective, better than a non-vegan one. In a joint



Vegan meals usually offer a full spectrum of natural colour

Hansen rode 20 back-to-back plant-fuelled Grand Tours



position paper, the American College of Sports Medicine, the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics and Dietitians of Canada state there is good evidence that well-planned vegan diets support parameters that influence performance.

**'PREPARING VEGAN MEALS IS TOO TIME-CONSUMING'**

Who wants to waste time endlessly chopping vegetables and making complicated recipes? "It does take time and effort to start with," admits Shaw. "However, like most things it gets easier with experience, and if you dedicate a bit of time to start with, it will become second nature. Personally, I've found the best way to combat the issue just through being organised." He admits that this may

be easier for him as a pro rider. "Amateurs who work a nine-to-five may not have as much time, but for me it's my profession to go as fast as possible and to make the time and efforts to meet the targets."

To cut down on prep-time, get into the habit of thinking ahead, making a shopping list to get everything delivered in one big order and learning a few easy vegan recipes which you can adapt according to what's in your fridge. For example, try my Oven-Roasted Ratatouille with Flageolet Beans (see p.51). Batch cooking gives you the gift of time in the kitchen – double the quantity of whatever you're cooking and save half for another day. You could also cook a whole week's worth of food on a Sunday.

**'EATING A VEGAN DIET IS MORE EXPENSIVE'**

Scroll through the images of aspirational-looking vegan meals on Instagram or walk down the supermarket aisle full of vegan meat substitutes and convenience meals, and you'll think that a vegan diet is prohibitively expensive. But there are plenty of vegan ingredients that cost less than animal products. "Canned kidney beans, chickpeas, pasta, rice and dried lentils are inexpensive and easy ways to get your protein and fibre on a vegan diet," says Azmina.

James Shaw agrees: "On the topic of cost, I personally haven't noticed any drastic changes. Yes, some of the meat substitutes and convenience options can be pricey if you are on the road. But

**"Plenty of vegan products cost less than animal products"**

for daily cooking at home, a vegan diet costs roughly the same as the way I ate before."

If you buy vegan snacks and supplements, then the cost can quickly add up. Instead, make your own healthy vegan snacks at home, for example, my Super Seedy Bars. Other ways to keep the cost down is by using frozen fruits and vegetables and buying items such as beans and pasta in bulk.

PLANT LIFE

**'Going vegan works – if you do it for the right reasons'**

**Australian WorldTour racer Brodie Chapman (FDJ Nouvelle Aquitaine Futuroscope), 30, has been vegan her entire adult life**

I turned vegan in 2008 when I was 17 after researching the literature and witnessing the animal cruelty and decided I didn't want to be part of it. Now I get everything I need from plants. I eat lots of vegan international cuisines and a lot of carbs, which is ideal for a cyclist. Recovery wise? I notice that I do recover quite quickly.

Some of the practical difficulties come down to social situations with other people. I also find if I'm eating out in certain restaurants in some countries, they don't have many vegan foods on the menu. The majority of the time, though, eating out isn't a problem.

For sceptics who say it's too difficult or time-consuming, I say you have to do your research. Most of my meals are very easy to prepare. It might take more time than buying fast food but it's not more time-consuming than, say, roasting meat.

Eating plant foods is much cheaper than eating meat and dairy, I've found. Rice, beans, tofu, soya milk, lentils are cheap, veg and fruit are cheap. Plant milks are roughly the same price but with oat milk you can make your own in a few seconds if you need to.

It can be impractical for tours if you're vegan but if you value your health and performance, it's worth putting in a bit more effort to be a bit more prepared. I've spoken to my team and explained what I eat. Yes, it's still a minority way of eating and not everyone understands it, you have to be patient.

The only risk for athletes is undereating because plant foods have fewer calories than animal foods, so you do need to eat more and probably train your gut to take on that amount of fibre. It probably becomes unhealthy from a psychological perspective if you're going vegan to try and lose weight or change the way your body looks – that's unhealthy because your diet becomes more restrictive. If you see it as a weight loss diet, you'll binge. I don't feel restricted on a vegan diet at all.

## “While others have eggs or fish, I’ll have tofu or lentils”

### ‘VEGAN DIETS ARE IMPRACTICAL WHEN ABROAD’

Staying well fuelled during cycling trips abroad is crucial, and eating a plant-only diet is likely to throw up its own unique challenges in these circumstances. “It is only when travelling on the road or overseas or eating out that I come across difficulties,” says British pro Damien Clayton (Canyon-dhb-SunGod), “but this is a direct result of people not being educated on the idea of plant-based eating. I am fortunate to have an understanding DS who requests my dietary needs prior to meals.”

Race fuelling is more about taking on carbs, less about consuming protein, so eating a vegan diet may not restrict your options as much as you think. “Most the time during tours I eat what everyone else

### TIPS

## Ready to go vegan?

#### Practical tips to get you started:

- **Slowly does it** Takes time to figure out what works for you.
- **Make some clever food swaps** Replacing foods such as dairy milk with fortified soya, almond, coconut or oat milks or swapping butter for a dairy-free spread makes it easier.
- **Resist vegan meat substitutes and ready meals** If you’re looking to save money, avoid these products.
- **Adapt your favourite meals** Try replacing meat in stir-fries, stews, curries or shepherd’s pie with beans, chickpea, lentils, tofu or tempeh.
- **Change the way you shop** Skip the meat and dairy aisles; head for those with beans, lentils and nuts.

eats, which is rice, pasta, bread, veg and a source of protein,’ says 30-year-old Australian pro Brodie Chapman (FDJ Nouvelle Aquitaine Futuroscope). “While other riders choose to have eggs, fish or meat, I’ll choose to have tofu, tempeh, lentils... I always travel with some protein powder but I’m never going to be protein-deficient as long as I eat enough calories. When you’re on tour you’re not looking for flavours and fancy food – you’re really looking to eat to perform.”

### ‘A VEGAN DIET DOES NOT SUPPLY ENOUGH ENERGY FOR CYCLISTS’

There’s no denying that it is harder to keep on top of energy demands on a vegan diet. Plant-based foods tend to have a lower energy density than animal-based foods. Plants are generally more filling too, meaning it can be difficult to eat large enough quantities – potentially under-fuelling your training. “At first I struggled to eat enough calories to support my body and sport,” admits Mason. “I was eating less high-fat, high-protein foods, so I needed to eat more volume to make up for the calories.”

Under-fuelling – or, to use its scientific term, low energy availability (LEA) – is a state in which your body doesn’t have enough energy left to support normal physiological functions. It can impact your health, put a ceiling on performance and eventually lead to low bone density. Often the first symptom that cyclists with LEA experience is a fractured bone. However, LEA is not a unique feature of vegan diets; it can also happen with non-vegan diets and is thought to be a widespread problem among elite and pro cyclists.

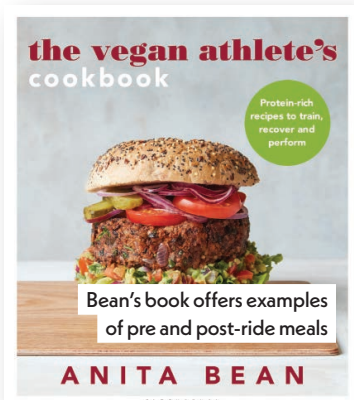
Mason, who is swiftly becoming one of the UK’s best cyclo-cross racers,



recommends transitioning slowly to a vegan diet, so you have time to change your eating habits and find out what you are lacking. Swapping wholegrain rice, pasta or bread for white versions can make it easier at first. “For me, things like nut butters, oils, nuts and seeds are an easy way to get my calories up,” says Mason.

### CONCLUSION

It is a myth that a vegan diet cannot provide all the nutrients a cyclist needs. On the contrary, scientists say that a varied, balanced plant-only diet can support health as well as the parameters that influence performance. But performance benefits are difficult to measure objectively so it is not possible to state with certainty that a plant-only diet is superior to a non-vegan one. In reality, preparing vegan meals does take time and effort to start with but this can be overcome through planning, organisation and learning a few easy vegan recipes. A vegan diet can be expensive if you opt for vegan meat substitutes and convenience meals; to keep costs down, opt for whole food sources of protein instead. If riding abroad, you may need to travel with vegan protein supplements. The main downside of vegan diets is the risk of under-fuelling; you may need to make a conscious effort to eat more and monitor your energy levels.



## RECIPES

The following recipes are extracted from Anita Bean’s new book, *The Vegan Athlete’s Cook: Protein-rich recipes to train, recover and perform*

### OVEN-ROASTED RATATOUILLE WITH FLAGEOLET BEANS

This recipe could not be easier to make – you simply add all the ingredients to a roasting tin and let the oven do the work. It is packed with beta-carotene, vitamin C, folate and fibre. The flageolet beans boost the protein content but you can easily substitute chickpeas or any other type of beans.

#### What you need:

**1 red onion, thinly sliced** 2 red peppers, deseeded and sliced **2 large courgettes, thinly sliced** 1 large aubergine, sliced into half-moons **2 x 400g cans flageolet beans, drained and rinsed** 2 cloves of garlic, crushed **A handful of basil leaves, torn** Salt and freshly ground black pepper **2 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil** 1 tbsp balsamic vinegar

**2 x 400g cans chopped tomatoes**

To serve: 300g Focaccia bread

#### Method:

- 1) Preheat the oven to 200°C/fan 180°C/gas mark 6.
- 2) Put the onion, peppers, courgettes, aubergine, chickpeas and garlic in a large roasting tin. Season generously with salt and freshly ground black pepper.
- 3) Add the olive oil and balsamic vinegar and toss so that the vegetables are well coated in the oil. Tip in the tomatoes and spread out evenly to cover the vegetables.
- 4) Transfer to the oven and roast for about 30 minutes. Stir and return to the oven for a further 30 minutes.
- 5) Serve hot or cold with wedges of focaccia bread or cooked couscous.

Per serving (inc Focaccia): 464kcal, 20g protein, 11g fat (2g saturates), 65g carbs (20g total sugars), 15g fibre

### SPICED CHICKPEA PILAFF WITH ALMONDS AND COCONUT YOGURT

This tasty combination of rice, chickpeas and almonds is an ideal pre-exercise meal that will sustain you through your workout.

#### What you need:

**1 tbsp light olive or rapeseed oil** 1 small onion, finely chopped **½ green or red pepper, chopped** 1 garlic clove, crushed **2cm piece fresh ginger, grated** 1 tsp cumin seeds **1 tsp each ground cumin, ground coriander and garam masala** ½ tsp turmeric **¼ tsp dried chilli flakes** 1 large carrot, peeled and diced **¼ butternut squash (250g), peeled and cut into 1cm cubes** 100g basmati rice **300ml hot vegetable stock or water** 400 g can chickpeas, drained and rinsed **25g sultanas** 75g frozen peas **25g almonds, toasted and crushed** 2 tbsp coconut yogurt alternative

#### Method:

- 1) Heat the oil in a large non-stick pan and fry the onion and green pepper over a gentle heat for five minutes. Add the garlic, ginger, cumin seeds and spices and continue cooking for one minute.
- 2) Add the vegetables and rice, mix until they are coated in the spices, add the vegetable stock or water, chickpeas, and sultanas. Stir well, bring to the boil, then reduce the heat, cover, and simmer for 10-12 minutes until most of the liquid has been absorbed.
- 3) Make sure the mixture does not boil dry; add extra water, if necessary.
- 4) Add the peas for the last three minutes. Serve topped with the almonds and a spoonful of coconut yogurt alternative.

Per serving 652kcal, 23g protein, 18g fat (2g saturates), 91g carbs (25g total sugars), 18g fibre

### SUPER SEEDY BARS

I wanted to create a snack bar that delivered maximum possible nutrition plus fantastic taste. And here is the result: super seedy, crunchy, nutty bars that are high in fibre, omega-3 fats, protein, B vitamins, vitamin E, magnesium, iron and zinc.

#### What you need:

**125g mixed seeds (or any combination of sunflower, pumpkin, sesame and flax seeds)** 100g mixed nuts (or any combination of almonds, cashews, Brazil and pecans) **25g ground flaxseed** 25g rolled oats **1 tsp vanilla extract** ½ tsp cinnamon **75 ml golden, agave or maple syrup** 50g dark chocolate (at least 70% cocoa)

#### Method:

- 1) Preheat the oven to 180°C/fan 160°C/gas mark 4. Line a 900g loaf tin (18cm x 6cm) with baking paper.
- 2) Place the seeds, nuts, flaxseed and oats in a large mixing bowl. Add the vanilla extract, cinnamon and syrup, and mix together.
- 3) Spoon into the prepared tin. Press down firmly, making sure there are no gaps, and bake for about 30 minutes until lightly golden but not brown around the edges. Take out of the oven and press down again using a large spoon. Allow to cool completely.
- 4) Break the chocolate into small pieces, place in a microwavable bowl and heat on full power for 2-3 minutes, stirring at 30-second intervals until almost molten. Stir and leave for a few moments until it is completely melted. Drizzle over the nut mixture.
- 5) Pop the tin into the freezer for the chocolate to set. Cut into eight bars. They will keep in an airtight container for seven days.

Per bar: 266kcal, 8g protein, 18g fat (4g saturates), 16g carbs (12g total sugars), 4g fibre

