

Planetary Wellbeing

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Become a Vegetarian to Reduce Water Toxicity

Your diet may be contributing to increased toxicity of our waterways. That's because some livestock farms generate the excrement waste equivalent to a small city by packing thousands of animals into a very small space. This kind of confined animal feeding operation (CAFO) is common in today's big business farming industry, and it's causing a huge mess of our water systems in the US (and around the world).

Take these disasters as two examples of the problem: In 1995, the excrement from a hog farm in North Carolina burst from its holding lagoon, spilling 25 million gallons of waste into the New River. This chemical-, antibiotic-, and pathogen-laced excrement killed 10 million fish and closed 364,000 acres of coastal wetlands to shell fishing.^[i]

Agriculture waste from animal waste also creates the perfect conditions for algae blooms in areas like the Gulf of Mexico where there is now a dead zone that extends up to 8,500 square miles into the sea.^[ii]

So one way you can reduce your contribution to water toxicity is to adopt a diet free from or very light in dairy and meat products. Not only is a vegetarian diet better for climate change and cruelty-free, it helps to protect our waters (and air and soil) from toxic pollution.

Quick Guide: Why Be a Vegetarian?

- **Animal excrement and pathogen pollution:** In the US, farmed animals produce 130 times more excrement than American humans. Untreated, this excrement sits in giant open air lagoons that often experience breaches, running into waterways. Animal excrement contains disease causing pathogens like *Salmonella*, *Cryptosporidium*, or *E. coli* in much higher concentrations than human waste. There are more than 40 diseases that are passed from animal waste to humans – pathogens that also are detrimental to ecosystems.^[iii]
- **Nitrate pollution from agriculture:** Growing feed for farmed animals means the use of nitrate-laden agriculture chemicals. When these nitrates end up in our drinking water (which they ultimately do), they increase the rates of spontaneous human abortions and blue baby syndrome (methemoglobinemia) that kills infants. In California alone, agriculture is the major source of nitrate pollution in more than 100,000 square miles of polluted groundwater.^[iv]
- **Antibiotic water pollution:** Approximately 80% of all antibiotics consumed in the US are used for livestock on American farms – about 29 million pounds total. These drugs are added to animal feed and given directly to livestock even before they're sick to "prevent" disease and stimulate faster growth.^[v] They are then excreted by the animals and wash into waterways. Overuse of antibiotics contributes to the creation of super bugs that are resistant to antibiotics which may one day lead to a pandemic disease outbreak in the future.^[vii] No one knows what the cumulative impact small quantities of antibiotics in meat and water will have on human health over a person's lifetime, but medical experts are concerned that it could have a profound impact on human health.
- **Growth hormones and water pollution:** Upwards of 80% of all beef cattle raised on US farms are pumped full of growth hormones to speed their development and fatten them up. Growth hormones in meat such as rBGH/rBST are also used to increase milk production in cattle.^[viii] Two of these – estradiol and zeranol – are linked to cancer and negative impacts on child development and can be found in residual amounts in meat. When these hormones enter waterways, they cause female fish to exhibit male characteristics and vice versa.^[ix]
- **Arsenic pollution from farms:** Pharmaceuticals like antibiotics contain the most carcinogenic form of arsenic. Two ounces of chicken contain 3 to 5 micrograms of this inorganic arsenic according to the USDA. This poison also washes into waterways in the excrement of livestock animals.^[x]

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Take Action! Becoming a Vegetarian

1. **Become vegan:** A vegan diet is one that is free of all animal-based foods, including meat, dairy, eggs, fish, poultry, and so on. There are many hidden animal byproducts used in today's food industry you'd need to watch for, including gelatin, honey, casein, and rennet.
2. **Become a vegetarian:** If you need to ease yourself into how to eat less meat, why not try out vegetarianism instead. Though there are many types of vegetarian diets, most often they exclude all meat, poultry, and fish but still include dairy

and eggs.

3. **Become a weekday vegetarian:** For those who need a slower introduction into a plant-based diet, try a weekday vegetarian menu. This usually involves eating meat on the weekends but avoiding it on the weekdays.
4. **Choose organic:** If you can't live without your meat and dairy, choose organic for both options. These products should be created using techniques that are free of antibiotics, agriculture chemicals, arsenic, and growth hormones.

Dig Deeper: How to Be a Vegetarian or a Vegan

- Order PETA's [Vegetarian/Vegan Starter Kit](#) to get all of the basic information, recipes, and tips you need to find out how to be a vegetarian or vegan.
- You're in good company if you become a vegetarian or vegan! Check out this list of [famous veg heads](#).
- Find out more about [hidden animal ingredients](#) in the average diet.
- Pick up a book like [Becoming Vegetarian](#) or [Becoming Vegan](#) to get health-related information on the benefits of a plant-based diet and how to do it right.
- Learn about the [types of vegetarian diets](#) from which you can choose.
- Find out what it means to be a [Weekday Vegetarian](#).

Images by [banditob](#) and [suzettesuzette](#)

[i] *Facts about Pollution from Livestock Farms.* (n.d.). Retrieved from National Resources Defence Council: <http://www.nrdc.org/water/pollution/ffarms.asp>

[ii] (Facts about Pollution from Livestock Farms)

[iii] *Vegetarian 101.* (n.d.). Retrieved from PETA: <http://www.peta.org/living/vegetarian-living/vegetarian-101.aspx>

[iv] (Facts about Pollution from Livestock Farms)

[v] (Facts about Pollution from Livestock Farms)

[vi] (Facts about Pollution from Livestock Farms)

[vii] National Research Council, *The Use of Drugs in Food Animals: Benefits and Risks* (Washington, DC: National Academy Press, 1999); John S. Spika et al., "Chloramphenicol-Resistant Salmonella Newport Traced through Hamburgers to Dairy Farms," *New England Journal of Medicine* 316 (1987): 565-570; Richard S. Schwalbe et al., "Isolation of Vancomycin-Resistant Enterococci from Animal Feed in USA," *The Lancet* 353 (1999): 722.

[viii] *rBGH / rBST.* (n.d.). Retrieved from Center for Food Safety: <http://www.centerforfoodsafety.org/campaign/food-safety/rbgh-hormones/rbgh-rbst/>

[ix] *rBGH/Hormones.* (n.d.). Retrieved from Center for Food Safety: <http://www.centerforfoodsafety.org/campaign/food-safety/rbgh-hormones/>

[x] *Playing Chicken: Avoiding Arsenic in Your Meat.* (2006, April). Retrieved from Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy: http://www.iatp.org/files/421_2_80529.pdf

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