

# Do vegetarian diets cause mental health issues?

Bryant Stamford, Special to the Courier-Journal 7:05 a.m. EDT November 3, 2016



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In recent columns I have focused on some really bad scientific reporting. I do this because the average person does not have the resources to determine good science from bad, and the media certainly doesn't help. Quite the contrary, the media stokes the fires of bad science by spreading bogus stories far and wide. Why? As you have read in this column many times, going against the grain and challenging established truths translates into newsworthy material, and bad science gains attention by doing exactly that.

As a long time vegetarian who has studied just about everything I can get my hands on about vegetarianism, I must admit strong suspicion at seeing this headline in *Women's Health*: "The Scary Mental Health Risks of Going Meatless." This article reported research findings suggesting that vegetarian diets cause depression, obsessive compulsive disorder, panic attacks, etc. In other words, if you are going to have good mental

health, you'd better load up your diet with meat.

The article is based on a slanted and naïve interpretation of two studies. In a German research study, vegetarians are 15 percent more likely to suffer from depression and twice as likely to suffer anxiety disorders. In an Australian study, vegetarians are less optimistic about the future than meat eaters.

From there, the journalist took off running, bashing vegetarian diets as destroying mental health.

Wow! Looks really bleak for us vegetarians, and sounds like we all should switch to double bacon cheeseburgers and risk heart disease in order to preserve our sanity. But before doing so, let's explore this issue a bit further.

## BOGUS NEWS REPORTING GONE WILD

In the German research study, there were several important points that were completely ignored, because to include them would have ruined the absurd news story.

Here is the critical point that makes all the difference in the world. The German researchers reported that in individuals who had developed mental health problems, many of them shifted to a vegetarian diet in hopes that it might help them be healthier and feel better, which then might, hopefully, translate to improved mental health. Similarly, perhaps those Australians who were pessimistic might have shifted to a vegetarian diet hoping to change their lives, be more optimistic and enjoy life more.

Let me add, on college campuses it's widely known that females with eating disorders (anorexia – self starvation) often will use vegetarianism as a cover. They avoid eating with others because they don't eat meat, when in fact they are not eating at all. The obvious key: being vegetarian didn't cause the eating disorder.

To place this in perspective, let's assume there is a research study that reports you should place a bandage on a bleeding wound. Duh! The problem is everyone knows this, and therefore it's not newsworthy.

Now, let's take a look at how a headline-mongering journalist makes this newsworthy. "Scientists report a close association between bleeding wounds and bandages. In fact, in our research there were no cases of bleeding wounds without bandages. This suggests that bandages cause bleeding wounds, and therefore it's best to avoid bandages." Amazingly stupid, but no doubt this story would be deemed newsworthy.

## ANOTHER EXAMPLE

Several years ago, inept researchers reported that a low serum cholesterol causes cancer. Therefore, while you are eating right to lower your cholesterol to reduce your risk of heart disease, at the same time you are increasing your risk of cancer. This got big headlines and it really confused the public.

The truth of the matter is, these researchers studied a group of cancer patients who were in advanced stages. If you know anything about this, you know that patients often waste away for many reasons, including a complete loss of appetite. This is the reason their cholesterol plummeted.

But it's not newsworthy to report that if you eat nearly nothing and lose an incredible amount of weight your cholesterol concentration will drop. So, we have been cursed for many years with this ridiculous report that is used by folks who don't want to shift to a healthier diet to lower their cholesterol.

## THE BOTTOM LINE

At times there may be correlations, but that in no way means one thing caused the other. For example, bandages and bleeding wounds are highly correlated, but please know that bandages do not *cause* bleeding wounds.

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