**Health Effects of Vegan Diets**

**Introduction**

Over the years, vegan diets have gained increasing popularity. About 2% of the general population excludes meat, dairy, and eggs from the individual’s daily diet. Vegans have quoted their allegiance to avoiding animal product and focus on plant-based products. Particularly, some studies have cited an existing correlation between vegan diets and health outcomes. Individuals who believe in the vegan diet have a strong conviction that a plant-based diet plays an important role in the prevention of numerous diseases (Wallis, 2004). For this reason, as the general population has continued to gain awareness of the existing relationship between diet and health, a specific percentage has chosen to abstain from meat, fish, eggs, and dairy products. Adopting a vegan diet is an entirely a personal choice depending on one’s apprehension of how different food products affect one’s health or enhance the risk of developing certain diseases (Messina & Fields, 2013). With the increasing popularity of the vegan diet, it is important to establish the available scientific evidence that links vegan diets with noteworthy health outcomes. The primary objective of the research project is to delve into the health effects of vegan diets comprehensively. Particularly, the research project will seek to identify prominent health effects that one can register from adopting a vegan diet. It is requisite to present a critical literature review that analyses the findings from different studies concerning the described benefits of vegan diets. An exhaustive analysis of the existing literature will aid in determining the existent gap for further investigation.

**Literature Review**

A recent study conducted to determine the health effects of vegan diets among Adventist cohorts by Le & Sabate (2014) demonstrated that these diets could provide the most critical nutrients that an individual needs. People who consume vegan diets have a lower body mass index and are less susceptible to developing hypertension and Type II diabetes. Moreover, they have a reduced risk of developing cancer compared to individuals who consume meat. All vegetarians have a remarkable risk reduction for cancer development. They are less likely to develop colon cancer, prostate cancer, and breast cancer. With cancer becoming a major issue of concern in the contemporary society, a vegan diet seems to provide a remarkable solution for individuals (Wallis, 2004). The consumption of a vegan diet also reduces the risk of mortality associated with cardiovascular diseases, ischemic heart disease, and cerebrovascular disease. There is evidence suggesting that vegans have a longer lifespan compared to non-vegetarians. Based on this study, it also emerged that a vegan diet reduces cardio-metabolic complications.

Additionally, a study by Craig (2009) demonstrated that vegan diets provide higher levels of dietary fiber, vitamin C, magnesium, iron, vitamin E, and phytochemicals. Moreover, vegan diets contain lower calories and limited amounts of saturated fats and cholesterol. As a result, the consumption of vegan diets reduces the risk of developing obesity, type II diabetes, and cardiovascular diseases. Through the consumption of vegan diets, it is possible to increase protective nutrients and phytochemicals that help in reducing the risk of developing chronic diseases (Wallis, 2004). The study ascertained that vegan diets involve plant-based foods, fruits, and vegetables that contain antioxidants and that can lower cholesterol levels. Individuals who believe in the vegan diet rely on whole grains that have cardio-protective effects. As a result, the study demonstrated that vegan diets help in preventing the most prevalent chronic illnesses.

An additional study by McCarty (2016) revealed that low-protein vegan diets might stimulate the secretion of a certain hormone that promotes vascular health. The findings in this study established that a vegan diet could help individuals to reduce their susceptibility to developing certain diseases. As long as individuals consuming the vegan diets have a deeper appreciation of how to balance all the necessary nutrients, then they are likely to enjoy numerous benefits associated with vegan diets. A greater percentage of Adventists registers a lowered risk of developing chronic illnesses because they rely on vegan diets. Recent studies have supported the evidence in this study that vegan diets enjoy outstanding health benefits by eliminating all animal products from their diet (Messina & Fields, 2013). With a greater assurance of heart health and a lower risk of developing diseases such as Type II diabetes and cancer, consumers of vegan diets are likely to register a longer lifespan than the general population consuming animal products.

In the view of Key, Appleby, and Rosell (2006), vegan diets have desirable nutrients; namely, carbohydrates, proteins, dietary fiber, fatty acids, and a diverse range of vitamins. However, there has been a major concern surrounding the protein content of vegan diets. Although vegan diets promote health due to other nutrients, some scholars have expressed concern over the limited amounts of proteins in many vegan diets. However, individuals who consume these diets register low cholesterol concentration levels, an aspect that is of great advantage in the prevention of numerous diseases. These authors emphasize the nutritional value of vegan diets highlighting that the diet helps in the prevention of hypertension, obesity, cardiovascular diseases, as well as cancer. These benefits associated with vegan diets have become elements of interest for many scholars who intend to use diet in the promotion of health and wellness (Messina & Fields, 2013). Despite these outstanding benefits, it is explicit that consumers of vegan diets may lack some of the nutrients found in animal products. Promoters of vegan diets have highlighted that natural supplements combined with vegan diets provide individuals with adequate nutrients. Many researchers have sought to identify plant-based foods that provide vegans with high quantities of proteins. These researchers have concluded that it is essential for individuals consuming vegan diets to give attention to promoting the proper balance of nutrients to enhance their overall health.

A recent study conducted by Trapp and Barnard (2010) discovered that vegan diets have a significant contribution in the treatment of Type II diabetes. Particularly, the consumption of vegan diets ensures that individuals with Type II diabetes only consume complex carbohydrates that do not trigger an immediate rise in sugar levels. These authors reviewed observational studies and intervention trials that have centered on establishing the benefits of vegan diets. Planning vegan diets cautiously can help people with diabetes control the disease effectively. Specifically, it is easier for people with diabetes to embrace a vegan diet that only involves the consumption of natural plant-based foods that are less likely to have a negative effect on health. The review foregrounded the potential benefits of vegan diets in the management and treatment of Type II diabetes. Similarly, Barnard et al. (2009) divulged that vegan diets have significant benefits in the management of Type II diabetes. Notably, the consumption of vegan diets makes weight loss easier. Obesity and overweight cases heighten the risk of developing Type II diabetes. However, it is possible to manage one’s weight by embracing a vegan diet. For individuals with Type II diabetes, the vegan diet eliminates saturated fats as well as the high glycemic index foods that aggravate insulin resistance in Type II diabetes (Wasserman, Mangels, & Vegetarian Resource Group, 2009). The consumption of vegan diets is likely to reverse insulin resistance and improve the body’s ability to manage sugar levels. Adopting a vegan diet may be the most efficacious strategy for managing Type II diabetes in agreement with these findings.

The consumption of vegan diets can lower cholesterol levels. Particularly, a study by Levin (2014) sought to analyze the blood cholesterol levels from individuals who ate fish, meat, vegetarians, and vegans. Based on the analysis, it was explicit that vegans who did not consume meat, fish, egg products, or dairy products consumed a higher level of dietary fiber. Specifically, the vegan diet allowed them to consume the least amount of fat and significantly low levels of saturated fats. As a result, vegans had low cholesterol levels compared to the other diet groups. High cholesterol levels have become a major issue of concern due to their ability to increase the susceptibility to cardiovascular diseases. In many instances, high cholesterol levels contribute significantly to the development of heart diseases, stroke, and other related conditions. For this reason, the study revealed that vegan diets register a 32% reduction in the risk of developing heart disease due to lower cholesterol levels (Wasserman, Mangels, & Vegetarian Resource Group, 2009). High cholesterol levels contribute significantly to the narrowing of coronary arteries due to the development of plaque. It becomes difficult for individuals to have a complete blood circulation due to the narrowing of the arteries a factor that may trigger chest pain or cause a heart attack. The consumption of vegan diets ensures that individuals do not develop coronary heart diseases because they only consume limited amounts of saturated fats.

Mariotti (2017) asserts that plant-based diets are of critical importance in promoting health and preventing diseases. In this comprehensive text, Mariotti (2017) explores various aspects of plant-based diets. Particularly, he establishes the existing link between plant-based diets and the promotion of health. The text gives attention to some of the nutrients from plant-based diets that help in enhancing a person’s health. The consumption of plant-based diets helps individuals to reduce the risk associated with various diseases. Plant-based diets contain certain nutrients that are not available in animal products. Particularly, the combination of a diverse range of plant-based products ensures that an individual can nourish the body with certain super foods known for the promotion of health and reduction of the risks associated with diseases. Some of these Superfoods include raw nuts, berries, beans, quinoa, broccoli, Chia seeds, flax seeds, spinach, kales, lentils, and oatmeal (Norris & Messina, 2011). A combination of these Superfoods can provide the body with antioxidants, anti-inflammatories, a diverse range of vitamins, mono-saturated fats, and other nutrients that promote health. Undoubtedly, vegan diets include most of these Superfoods and a combination of various fruits, vegetables, legumes, whole grains, and nuts. The Mariotti (2017) demonstrates how these plant-based diets may be the solution in the efforts to prevent various chronic diseases. Individuals who consume plant-based diets register more positive health outcomes and are less likely to develop lifestyle diseases.

In the view of Davis, Melina, and Berry (2010), vegan diets include the consumption of raw plant-based foods that have numerous benefits in reversing and preventing different diseases. Consumers of vegan diets believe that the consumption of raw vegetables and fruits provides a higher quantity of phytochemicals and antioxidants that are necessary for disease prevention. For this reason, many vegans are likely to blend raw fruits and vegetables with the purpose of maximizing the benefits of the vegan diets. Notably, consuming raw plant-based diets has proven to be one of the natural ways of healing diseases such as cancer, heart disease, Type II diabetes, fibromyalgia and rheumatoid arthritis. The growing interest in vegan diets has led to the increased consumption of raw plant-based foods that provide a high percentage of the phytochemicals and antioxidants that aid in disease prevention. Maintaining a proper balance of raw and cooked vegan diets is likely to register outstanding benefits in the prevention of various diseases (Norris & Messina, 2011). Undoubtedly, individuals who consume vegan diets increase their immunity and make their bodies immune to various diseases. The determination of such individuals to detoxify and rejuvenate their body system motivates them to consume raw plant-based foods. There are numerous cases in which raw plant-based diets have helped individuals in reversing the adverse effects of certain diseases. Undoubtedly, an increasing number of people that have embraced vegan diets seek to enjoy these benefits instead of relying on western medicine.

A study conducted by Beezhold et al. (2015) revealed that individuals who consume vegan diets are likely to enjoy additional benefits compared to vegetarians and omnivores. Vegans are likely to register a favorable and stable mood brought about by the nutrients in the plant-based foods. Omnivores registered negative mood effects based on their diet. The omnivores were more susceptible to developing mood disturbance and disorders. Such effects were not reported in individuals who survived on vegan diets. On the contrary, individuals consuming vegan diets are more likely to enjoy mood stability. Plant-based diets promote the overall health of a person and lead to a better mood adjustment. Consumers of vegan diets recognize the unique benefits of plant-based diets and feel energetic when compared to other diet groups (Saunders, 2003). It is apparent that the phytochemicals in plant-based diets restore the functioning of the body systems and enhance psychological stability a factor that improves mood. As a result of the greater mood stability, consumers of vegan diets are less likely to develop mental disorders in the future. Apparently, plant-based diets prevent both chronic and psychological disorders as they have a direct correlation to positive health outcomes.

**Identification of the Gap in Literature**

The available literature focuses on highlighting the benefits of vegan diets in disease prevention and the promotion of health. Many of the studies have demonstrated how plant-based diet can provide a diverse range of nutrients that promote health. However, none of these studies have explored how individuals who consume vegan diets can increase their protein intake by incorporating specific high protein plant-based foods. The greatest concern regarding plant-based foods has been the amount of proteins that they provide. Individuals with an active lifestyle that involves regular exercise often require a gram of protein for each kilogram of their weight on a daily basis (Saunders, 2003). For this reason, individuals who consume vegan diets need to understand specific foods that they can consume to meet their daily protein requirement. For omnivores, it is easier to meet the requirement through the consumption of lean meats, dairy products, and eggs. None of the studies conducted has explored the strategies that vegans can use to increase their protein intake. Most of the vegans are unaware of the specific Superfoods that they should consume if they wish to increase their protein intake without relying on animal products (Norris & Messina, 2011). For this reason, future research needs to explore plant-based foods that have high protein content.

**Summary**

Vegan diets have received an appraisal for their contribution in the prevention and management of chronic illnesses. Over the years, researchers have focused on understanding the outstanding benefits of adopting a vegan diet. The available evidence demonstrates that vegan diets reduce the risk of developing Type II diabetes, certain types of cancer, cardiovascular diseases, hypertension, and other lifestyle diseases. Plant-based diets do not contain high levels of saturated fats when compared to animal products. Additionally, plant-based diets contain significant levels of dietary fiber that reduces cholesterol level. High cholesterol levels indicate an increased risk of developing coronary heart disease and other related cardiovascular diseases. However, maintaining low cholesterol levels requires close attention to the foods that an individual consumes. Some studies have revealed that individuals who consume vegan diets register the lowest levels of cholesterol, an aspect that signifies good health.

Adopting a vegan diet requires the appreciation that many of the plant-based foods, when consumed in their natural forms, are likely to nourish the body with a diverse range of nutrients. The increased amounts of antioxidants, anti-inflammatory, and phytochemicals available in plant-based diets are one of the reasons why these diets have gained popularity. Vegan diets can improve an individual’s mood and increase their lifespan significantly. The consumption of vegan diets reduces morbidity and mortality rates significantly. However, none of the studies has provided guidelines on how to increase protein intake when relying on vegan diets. It is explicit that plant-based diets are less likely to contain equal amounts of proteins as those found in animal products. For this reason, future research should focus on highlighting how vegans can meet their daily protein requirement while promoting health.

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