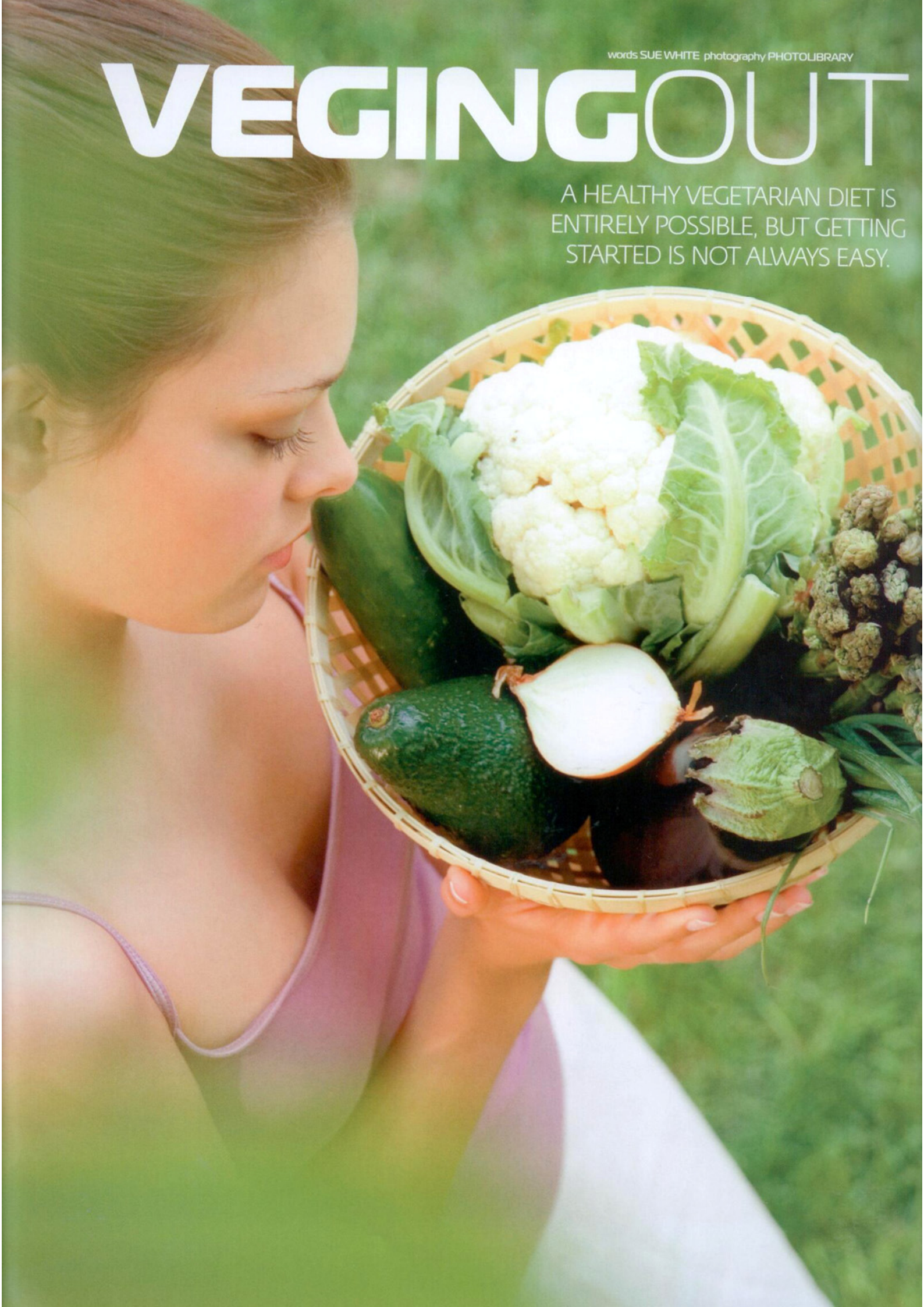


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# VEGIN G OUT

A HEALTHY VEGETARIAN DIET IS ENTIRELY POSSIBLE, BUT GETTING STARTED IS NOT ALWAYS EASY.



**If there's ever a story that should come with a confession attached, it's this one. I'm thinking something along the lines of the following: "Hi, my name is Sue and I'm a vegetarian. And when I started, I was hopeless at it. For ages."**

Like many who turn vegetarian, I made the switch to support my ethical beliefs. Put simply, I wanted to know that my meals weren't causing undue harm, most obviously to animals, but also to the planet. On environmental grounds, there's no doubting that a vegetarian diet is lower-impact than a meat-eating one. Consider water use alone: "A pound of meat requires 50 times as much water as an equivalent quantity of wheat," points out ethicist Peter Singer in his definitive text, *Animal Liberation*.

As one of the most outspoken animal libbers on the planet, it's not surprising that Singer came up with this fact well before most people started thinking about the environmental impacts of our food choices. But, nowadays, it's not only the radical greenies who can see the planet would be better off if we ate less meat. As the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organisation reported in 2006: "The livestock sector is ... responsible for 18 per cent of greenhouse gas emissions measured in CO<sub>2</sub> equivalent. This is a higher share than transport."

But, while a vegetarian diet can be a great choice for the planet, it takes focus to make sure it's equally good for your body. It kills me to admit it, but the behaviour of recent converts to vegetarianism (at least, those who haven't done their research) is very often unhealthy.

While my current diet contains a good balance of proteins, vitamins and minerals, I count myself among the many who began my vegetarian life with the approach of "keep doing exactly what you were doing — just cut out the meat". In this manner, a chicken salad becomes a green salad; spaghetti bolognese transforms into spaghetti napoletana ... a balanced diet goes out the window and within a few months you're lucky to have the energy to fight your way out of a paper bag.

The answer to a healthy vegetarian diet goes beyond simply removing animal products. Grains, pulses, vegetables, protein foods and fruit are all vital for all of us, but in a vegetarian diet, getting the mix right is particularly important, because a lot of the lazy options aren't going to provide a nourishing meal.

"You can have a very healthy diet, but there are some issues of concern when someone chooses to switch without thinking it through," says associate professor Geoff Marks of the University of Queensland's School of Population Health. "The key message is you have to re-evaluate your overall diet."

Reassessing what you eat is entirely achievable of course, but as anyone who has ever gone on a diet knows, it takes work. Unless you want to chow down on mountains of marinated tofu, as a healthy vegetarian you need to become more creative at your kitchen counter. That green salad? Hopeless until you add a sprinkling of nuts and seeds (think sunflowers or pepitas) and a can of chickpeas or beans for protein. Not getting enough fruit and veg? Try making smoothies or juicing in the morning to add a vitamin hit. Want to ramp things up even further? Add citrus to your meals (chop up an orange and toss it in with that salad) to help absorb your iron.

While it may sound daunting to the uninitiated, for me the solution was two-fold. The first? An inspiring cookbook: *The Essential Vegetarian Cookbook*, Murdoch Books, remains a favourite to this day, and its fast lentil soup recipe is so good it's now cooked regularly by numerous meat-eating friends across Sydney.

The second? Conscious eating in acknowledgment of the fact that a last-minute vegetarian effort often becomes an exercise in empty carbohydrates. This became far easier as I began likening eating to my other environmental choices: walking to the shops may take a bit more effort than jumping in the car, but the pay-off is worth it.

Mark Berriman, director of the Australian Vegetarian Society, agrees that preparation is important in making the transition healthily to a vegetarian diet. "Read a few books,

try a few restaurants, check out websites and web forums, and even go to some of the Vegetarian Society events," he suggests.

Of course, you can always begin slowly. Most of the experts recommend cutting down meat a little at a time over (for want of a better term) going cold turkey. With heavy meat consumption often linked to heart disease, it's an action that many would benefit from even if they still planned to eat meat.

"If you look at the recommendations from bodies such as Meat & Livestock Australia, they are worlds away from what they were a decade or two ago," Mark says. "These days, it's all about trimmed meats, modest intakes and they don't promote eating meat twice a day."

While most of the supposed vitamin deficiencies attached to a vegetarian diet are surmountable with a little effort, those who put in the research may find that the issue of vitamin B<sub>12</sub> is hard to overcome without some help. "It's probably the

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most difficult," Berriman observes. "Most people say 'more mushrooms', but there's a limit to what you can do with that. In the end, a supplement is the appropriate answer for most."

Six years in, I no longer make the beginners' mistakes that stopped my early vegetarian diet from nourishing my body. When dining out, I choose meals containing proteins and pulses over empty carbs. In my local community I have joined food co-ops and shop in health food stores, where staff willingly educate their shoppers about the benefits of grains I've never even heard of. And each time I lift my fork I am reassured by the fact that my meal and my ethics are no longer on a collision course.

Perhaps I'm ready to update my confession: "My name is Sue and I'm a healthy vegetarian." With a little effort, you can be, too. 