

# Challenges and Supports for Vegetarians

## About the Toronto Vegetarian Association

The Toronto Vegetarian Association (TVA) was founded in 1945 by a small group of individuals who banded together to organize social gatherings, lectures, and letter-writing campaigns. Today's TVA is a professional charitable organization delivering information and resources through a variety of programs including websites, a print directory, and workshop events. Our flagship event, the Annual Vegetarian Food Festival, is attended by approximately 40,000 people each year. In 2014, the TVA is supported by more than sixteen hundred members, hundreds of volunteers, and two full-time staff.

### **Mission**

To inspire people to choose a healthier, greener, more compassionate lifestyle through plant-based eating.

### **Vision**

We envision a world where people think critically about their food choices, where growing numbers of businesses, community groups, and organizations inspire people to make healthier, greener, more compassionate choices, and where nutritious, sustainable plant-based foods are accessible to all.

The TVA is a broad coalition of individuals motivated by commitments to moral and personal concerns, including (but not limited to) compassion and advocacy for animals, personal and public health, and ecological sustainability. As we engage people with each of these important issues through our work, we advocate a common solution: to move away from the standard meat-centered North American diet in favour of healthy and delicious plant-based alternatives.

### **Values**

The TVA will operate in a way that:

- Promotes the health of people, non-human animals, and the environment
- Provides expert information as Toronto's go to resource for all things veg
- Supports those interested in exploring plant-based living
- Celebrates Toronto's diversity and is respectful of people from all backgrounds
- Embraces our grassroots, volunteer-driven history
- Is fiscally responsible and forward-thinking
- Is socially responsible and eco-friendly
- Shows its appreciation of the contributions made by volunteers and staff
- Engages our stakeholders & audiences in constructive dialogue

## About the Current Study

### Purpose

One of the initiatives in the 2014-2018 Strategic Plan is to support both existing and new vegetarians by providing information and support to allow them to sustain their commitment to a plant-based diet. As a part of this initiative, the TVA needed to assess reasons why vegetarians lapse and what are the greatest needs for new vegetarians. For the purpose of this study, vegetarian was defined as any plant-based diet (including veganism).

### Methodology

An online survey was developed in order to meet the above objectives. The survey consisted of a series of questions pertaining to:

- Current and past eating habits
- Challenges faced by vegetarians
- How helpful various programs, services, and initiatives would be in facing those challenges; and
- Demographics (age and gender)

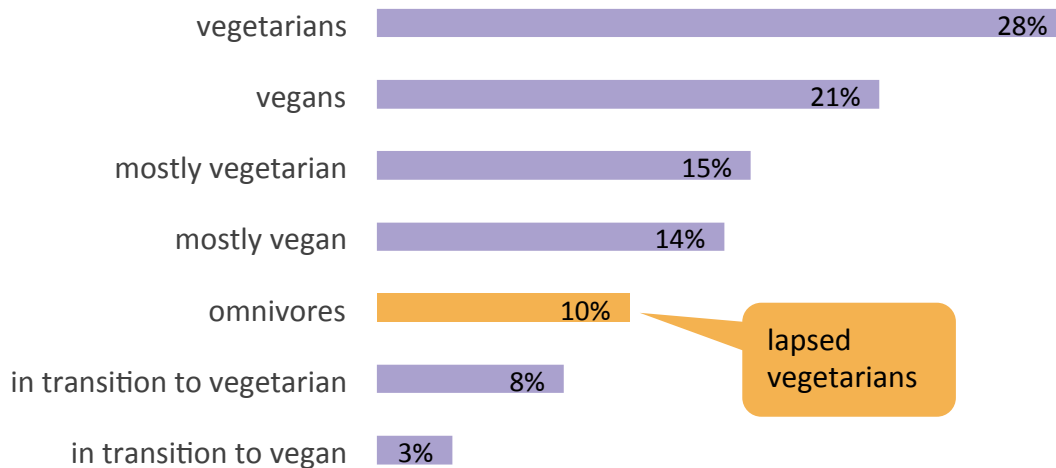
The survey was anonymous. In order to be eligible to complete the survey, participants must currently or at some time in the past have followed a plant-based diet. The survey was broadcasted widely through the TVA's social media channels (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, e-mail) and people were asked to share the link with any lapsed vegetarians in their social network. All participants were entered into a draw to win a \$100 gift certificate to Shopper's Drug Mart.

## Survey Findings

### Participants

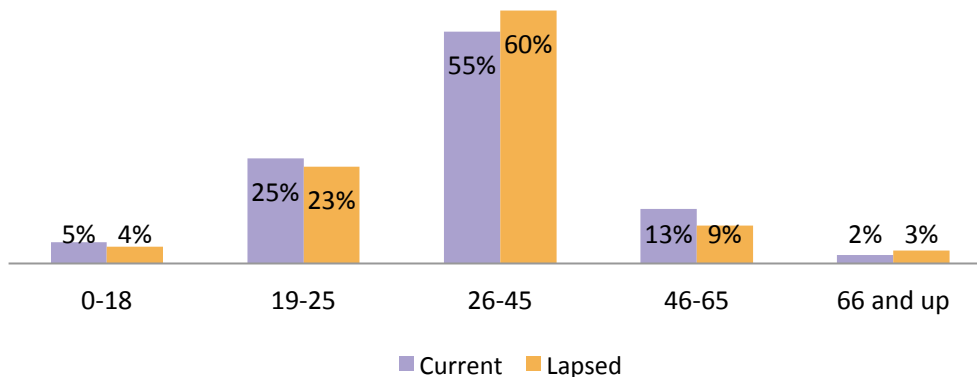
Of the **1112** people completed the survey, 90% (N=999) were currently following a plant-based diet and 10% (N=113) were lapsed vegetarians (i.e., are now omnivores).

Most survey participants were currently plant-based  
**10% were lapsed vegetarians**



The demographic profiles of the lapsed and current vegetarians were similar.

Most participants were between 26-45 years old



The gender was quite skewed: 90% of lapsed vegetarians and 85% of current vegetarians were female.

On average, the lapsed vegetarians were vegetarian for an average of **4 years** before returning to meat consumption – however, responses to this question varied a lot, ranging from less than 1 month to more than 20 years.

On average, lapsed vegetarians interacted with **4** vegetarians on a weekly basis.

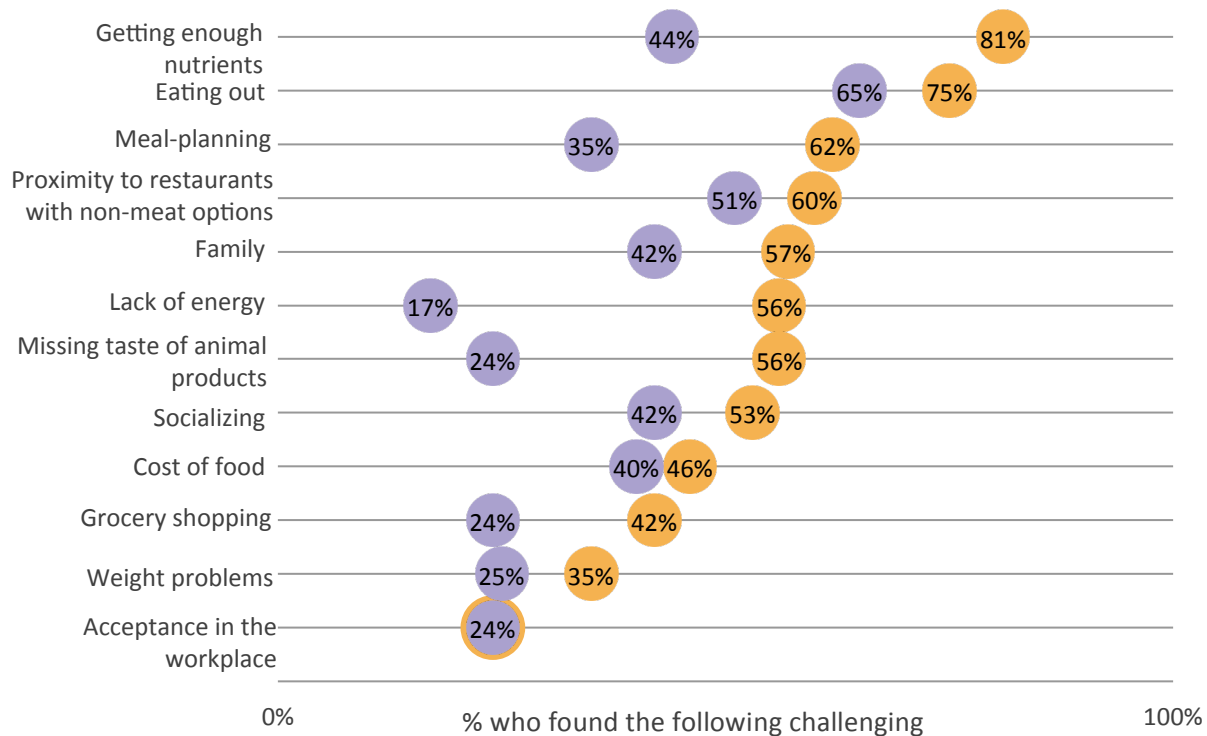
- 67% had at least one vegetarian friend
- 48% knew at least one vegetarian acquaintance
- 43% knew at least one vegetarian classmate
- 36% had at least one vegetarian family member

At the time of data collection, the current vegetarians were vegetarian for an average of **10 years**. Once again, responses varied a lot - from less than 1 month to more than 60 years. One fifth (20%) of current vegetarians reported returning to meat at some point during their vegetarianism. The average amount of time they had returned to eating meat was **1 year** (answers ranged from less than one month to 11 years).

### Challenges Faced as a Vegetarian

Both current and lapsed vegetarians were asked about the challenges they face/faced as a vegetarian. Overall, lapsed vegetarians rated the following as more challenging than current vegetarians:

#### Challenges for **current** and **lapsed** vegetarians



**“I grew tired of spending so much time on meal planning to make sure I was getting the proper amount of essential amino acids, etc.”**

-Lapsed vegetarian

“My **iron levels were dangerously low** and I needed to reintroduce meat sources of iron into my diet; I began having extreme meat cravings near the end of my vegetarianism and I believe that was **my body telling me I needed the iron** (which I found out later due to blood tests).”

-Lapsed vegetarian

Interestingly, both **eating out** and **not getting enough nutrients** were top challenges for both groups.

#### Lapsed

1. Not getting enough nutrients: 81%
2. Eating out: 75%
3. Amount of time to plan meals: 62%

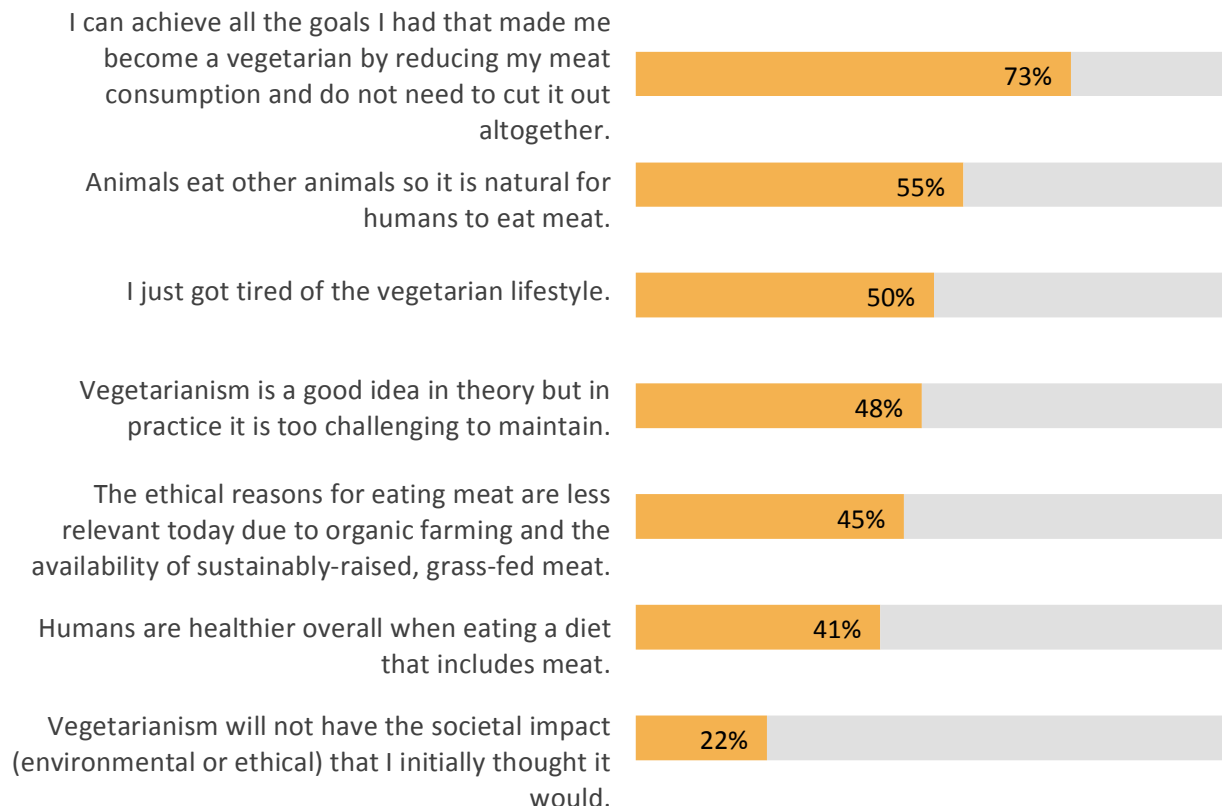
#### Current

1. Eating out: 65%
2. Proximity to restaurants with non-meat options: 51%
3. Not getting enough nutrients: 44%

## Attitudes toward Vegetarianism

Lapsed vegetarians were asked to rate their agreement with seven statements representing arguments against vegetarianism. Of note - nearly three-quarters of lapsed vegetarians felt that they could achieve the goals that made them become vegetarian by simply **reducing** their meat consumption.

### Lapsed vegetarians' views toward plant-based diets



“**I'd rather eat real meat** than fake meat. Vegetarian meat alternatives like soy and TVP don't agree with me and **I don't like the taste** and when they're the only option (travelling, camps, cafeterias) I'd rather eat the known meat product most of the time.”

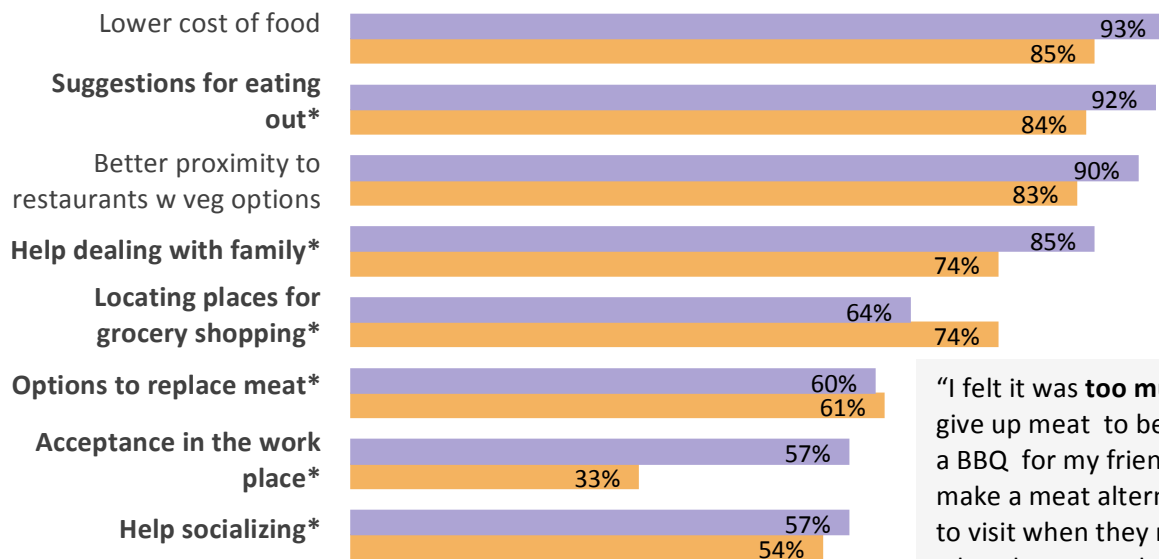
-Lapsed vegetarian

## Top Rated Supports

Both current and lapsed vegetarians were asked whether the following supports would be helpful. There were no significant differences between groups. Supports marked with a \* indicate those that the TVA could possibly impact.

### Supports for **current** and **lapsed** vegetarians

% who would find the following helpful



“I felt it was **too much of a sacrifice** to give up meat to be the odd man out at a BBQ for my friends and family to make a meat alternative when I went to visit when they really had no idea what they were doing and **I really just wanted to enjoy life.**”  
-Lapsed vegetarian

It is important to note that while getting enough nutrients was the top challenge reported by lapsed vegetarians, none of the above supports address this concern. In developing a strategy to support vegetarians, it is recommended that the TVA include a nutritional component.

Initially this study was focused on insights from lapsed vegetarians with the assumption that this would equip the TVA to develop supports for new vegetarians. An interesting finding is that **20% of current vegetarians** had lapsed back to eating meat at some point, but returned to a vegetarian diet at a later point in time. This highlights that it is not only new vegetarians who require supports, but existing vegetarians as well.

The top challenges across current and lapsed vegetarians are centred around nutrition, eating out at restaurants, and meal planning. These are all where the TVA can support vegetarians and it is recommended that the TVA focus its strategy on these capacities.