

Could there be a vegetarian gene?

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Those who favor a plant-based diet may be hardwired that way.

In an intriguing new study, researchers at Cornell University report the discovery of a [genetic variation](#) that evolved over generations in populations who ate vegetarian diets.

Historically vegetarian populations are in India, Africa and parts of East Asia, the scientists found. The genetic adaptation allows them to "efficiently process omega-3 and [omega-6 fatty acids](#) and convert them into compounds essential for [early brain development](#)," said the study, which was published in the journal *Molecular Biology and Evolution*.

But Cornell researchers also found that the "vegetarian gene" may increase the risk of heart disease and colon cancer for some. Those who eat green and have the genetic variation, "If they stray from a balanced omega-6 to omega-3 diet, it may make [them] more susceptible to inflammation, and by association, increased risk of heart disease and [colon cancer](#)."

The research team studied the frequencies of the "vegetarian" genetic variation in 234 primarily vegetarian Indians and 311 Americans. While only 18 percent of the American subjects had the "vegetarian gene," a whopping 68 percent of the Indian participants had it.

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