

ABSTRACT

Vegetarianism and Obesity in Jamaica

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Most anthropometric studies on vegetarians have focused on their relatively lower bodyweights and body fat, rather than on the degree of obesity within the vegetarian population. Obesity is a significant problem in Jamaica and the rest of the Caribbean and is a risk factor for some chronic diseases including hypertension and diabetes mellitus.

Anthropometric estimates and lifestyle characteristics of a study population (n=209) consisting of vegetarians (n=103) and non-vegetarians (n=106) were examined in relation to obesity. Both groups consisted of individuals sharing similar lifestyles (in regards to cigarette smoking, alcohol use, exercise and health awareness, based on religious and/or health philosophies). Estimates of weight, height, waist and hip circumferences, were obtained using standardized measurement techniques. Population values of BMI, percent obese (BMI>29.9 Kg/m²) and waist to hip ratios are presented. No significant differences in obesity were found between vegetarians and non-vegetarians of the sample. Vegetarians, however, had significantly lower BMI's (p<0.05) than non-

vegetarians. Also, when compared with another Jamaican study sample, our vegetarian sample was significantly less obese ($p < 0.005$), suggesting that lifestyle is probably a stronger predictor of obesity than the absence of meat from the plate. Less vegetarians smoked cigarettes and consumed alcohol. There were also indications that more vegetarians participated in formal exercise. Vegan females had a significantly lower waist to hip ratio than meat-eating females, and vegan males had significantly lower BMI's than meat-eating males. This suggests a lower risk of central obesity in vegan females and a lower risk of obesity in vegan males.

Keywords: Paul S A Johnson; Vegetarians; Vegetarianism; Obesity; Lifestyle; Vegans; Smoking; Alcohol; Exercise; Waist to hip ratio; Health awareness; Jamaica.