

Vegetarians and Vegans More Compassionate Than Omnivores, Study Finds

 healthyeatingharbor.com/vegetarians-vegans-more-compassionate

By Sebastijan Veselic

This time, something from the neuroscience department. Believe it or not – dividing people by their eating habits has been of interest in the field of neuroscience too. A group of researchers was trying to find out something very interesting – do our brains work differently just because of different eating patterns?

In the first case they were interested whether there would be differences in brain activation among vegetarians, vegans, and omnivores when it came to seeing images of human and animal suffering. I'm sure we can guess the obvious results, but some interesting results came up along the way.

In the [second case](#) they were interested whether there would be anything different if they showed them a silent video of people, monkeys, and pigs biting, or in the other scenario, opening their mouths.

The study included 20 omnivores, 19 vegetarians, and 21 vegans. All were healthy and had no history of serious disease that could affect the results. Vegans and vegetarians were selected for the study if they decided for this eating pattern because of ethical or moral reasons.

What did they find out?

They found out that the activation of certain brain areas was different among omnivores, vegetarians, and vegans, when they were seeing pictures of animals or humans that were suffering, who would have thought.

When omnivores were seeing scenes of animal and human suffering, they had a greater activation of the posterior middle temporal gyrus (MTG) whose current function is unknown. It is a part of the brain located near your ears – if you go inside of course.

What about the really interesting stuff?

- Vegetarians and vegans had a higher activation of brain areas that are related to empathy when they were viewing scenes of suffering.
- This was independent whether they were shown animals or people – their brain had a more intense empathetic response to suffering when compared to omnivores.
- They had a higher activation of empathy-related brain areas when they were watching scenes of suffering that had animals in them, rather than people.

Let us hold here for a second.

Could that mean that vegans and vegetarians have more empathy than omnivores – not only when it comes to animals, but in general too?

Do they really have more empathy?

It is important to understand that despite recording higher brain activity in areas that are related to empathy, it doesn't necessarily mean those people are automatically more empathetic. That is why they also had to fill out a self-report questionnaire about their empathy.

They noted that connections between the scores on this test and the brain activation was positive in vegetarians and vegans, and negative in omnivores. As one would suspect based on the previous paragraphs. This can be regarded as a "safety net" of sorts so they could make their findings more conclusive.

Another intriguing finding is that vegetarians and vegans had a reduction in the activity of the right amygdala when they were watching scenes of animal suffering.

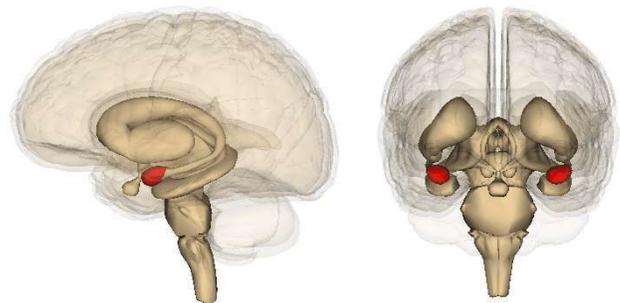
Amygdala

The amygdala is responsible for the processing of memory and emotional reactions, especially negative emotions such as fear.

Credit source: [Wikipedia Commons](#)

Those red dots are the left and right amygdala.

This might suggest that it was [down-regulated](#) by areas in the front part of our brain. These frontal areas modify emotions to a certain extent, and the noted down-regulation was probably an attempt to regulate their emotional response during those scenes.



In conclusion

Vegetarians and vegans, compared to omnivores, show more brain activation in areas related to empathy when presented with images of suffering – be it animal or human.

Their brain also has a stronger response when it comes to scenes of animal suffering as opposed to human suffering.

Now, what I am curious about is, would you agree with these findings from personal experience, or do you think it is total hogwash?

[The Brain Functional Networks Associated to Human and Animal Suffering Differ among Omnivores, Vegetarians and Vegans \(2010\), PLoS one](#)

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