Vegan Junk Food... blessing or curse?

Many people assume that becoming vegan means giving up donuts, cheesecake, smores, gummy bears, ice cream bars, cheezies, chicken wings, cheeseburgers and every other favourite treat imaginable. Twenty years ago, they would have been right. Today, they’d be dead wrong. Vegan versions of almost every convenience food, snack food and fast food are now yours for the taking. It is wonderful and horrible all at the same time. On the one hand, it is a bit of a relief to know that you can provide your child with a “reasonable look-alike” when their friends are enjoying ice cream bars on a hot summer day or roasting marshmallow’s at their highly anticipated class camp out. On the other hand, if you get a little too cosy with these processed foods you could end up with a vegan diet that is as bad as the standard American diet (SAD) that were so determined to avoid.

In this hectic world of multi-tasking, convenience foods have an undeniable attraction. While popping a veggie pie in the microwave is no doubt faster than preparing dinner from scratch, you have to consider the cost of cutting corners with the raw materials used to replace your brain cells (and the rest of your body!). Processed, packaged foods are carefully designed to tantalize your taste buds, and keep you coming back for more. This task is cleverly accomplished with salt, sugar and fat, all of which have a nasty way of coming back to bite you in the butt.
Not so long ago, most people had no clue what the word *vegan* meant. Those that recognized the word associated with extreme, dangerous, vegetarian diets. Today, the word *vegan* is viewed in a far more flattering light. This shift is the direct result of a couple of decades of scientific evidence confirming the safety, adequacy and potential benefits of well-planned vegan diets. You can walk into any mainstream grocery store and find products with the word *vegan* prominently displayed across the label. Producers use the word *vegan* to sell goods because consumers associate this word with wholesome, nutritious, ethical and green. Many assume that foods baring the “v” word are nutritionally beyond reproach. Don’t be fooled. Just because you see the word *vegan* on a label does not automatically quality the item as healthful. Nor, does it qualify the food as low-calorie, low-fat, low-sugar or “low” anything. Some of the world’s most unhealthful foods are 100% vegan – soda pop and deep fried salty snacks being two perfect examples.

What does this all mean when it comes to our food choices? Can you afford to eat any of the tempting treats sitting on natural food store shelves? While you don’t have to completely eschew the tasty convenience foods that are appearing in ever increasing numbers, you best be savvy about where on the health food spectrum these foods really lie. The following guidelines will help you sort the proverbial wheat from the chaff:

1. **Eat mainly whole plant foods** – vegetables, fruits, legumes, whole grains, nuts and seeds. Make these foods the centerpieces of all your meals. Go for at least 10 servings of vegetables and fruits, with at least 3 servings of leafy greens each day.
2. If you eat vegan convenience foods, do so in moderation. Frozen entrees, veggie meats, frozen whole grain waffles, packaged mixes, and the like can offer variety and enjoyment, but they should not become dietary staples. These foods tend to be high in salt and sugar, and are sometimes exposed to harsh chemicals in their processing.

3. If you eat vegan snack foods and fast foods, do so only on occasion, and in moderation. Foods that fall into this category include vegan hot dogs, ice cream, candy bars and sweet baked goods containing white flour and/or sugar.

4. If you use soyfoods, stick to organic, first generation soy products such as edamame, roasted soybeans, baked soybeans, tofu, tempeh and soymilk. Minimize highly processed soyfoods, especially those based on isolated soy protein or soy oil.

5. Learn to read labels! While the nutrition facts give you a lot of valuable information about salt, sugar, fat and nutrient content, the ingredient list is every bit as important. Ingredients are listed by weight, so whatever appears first is present in the greatest quantity. Take note of the sources of fat, sugar and protein in the product.

6. Make sure you take care of the nutrients of concern – particularly vitamin B12, but also vitamin D, calcium,
iron, zinc, iodine and essential fatty acids. Ignoring these nutrients can erode most of the advantages enjoyed on a whole foods vegan diet.