

## Dietitian Review of Netflix Docuseries *You Are What You Eat*

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**TLDR: Netflix's *You Are What You Eat* docuseries is essentially an ad for a vegan diet; episodes are chalk full of bias, food fear mongering, and sensationalism. Throughout the series there is a blatant lack of an unbiased opinion, expert or counterbalance of any sort. If you are going to watch the series (or have already) take a moment to consider the opposing side and reflect on how the information presented made you feel. *You Are What You Eat* is riddled with diet culture which, I suspect, will do more damage than good. Please note that I do not think being a vegan is a bad thing. As a dietitian, I recommend eating plants as often as you can, eating adequately, variedly, and in moderation. I encourage eating to be flexible and intuitive. If that means you eat plant based 90% of the time, great. If you eat plant based 50% of the time, great. Food is not the enemy, and I would argue, according to recent research, you are in fact NOT what you eat.**

Netflix has once again created a nutrition documentary that has dietitians around the world rolling their eyes. Historically speaking, many nutrition documentaries are full of bias, contain information taken out of context, highly sensationalized, and limited in perspective. *You Are What You Eat*, a new docuseries examining the [Stanford Twin's Study](#) that was published in November of 2023, is sadly no different. The Stanford Twin Study (and the Netflix show) aims to examine the cardiometabolic effects of eating a plant-based diet (vegan) versus an plant and animal based diet (omnivore) in twins during an 8 week time period. The study itself looks at the cardiometabolic effects of each diet (before the 8 weeks and after); measures examined included: low density lipoprotein (LDL) cholesterol concentration, plasma lipids, glucose, insulin levels, serum trimethylamine *N*-oxide levels, plasma vitamin B12, and body weight. The Netflix show goes further and examines several other measures including the gut microbiome (via stool samples), VO2 maximum (fitness) levels, and arousal thermography (temperature changes in genitals) – these measurements were not included in the Stanford study.

After watching the first two episodes, I quickly determined that this documentary is vegan diet propaganda – we do not hear from anyone that is a non-biased source. We hear again and again throughout the documentary statements that are fear mongering foods. For example, we hear that cheese is “biologically addictive”, which is simply incorrect. Food is not physically addictive. We must consider the definition of addiction here and understand that since we need food to live and survive, we cannot be addicted to food in the same sense that someone can be addicted to alcohol or drugs. Later in the first episode we hear from Dr. Michael Greger that “too much dairy consumption, in general, increases the risk of Parkinson’s disease and prostate cancer.” Dr. Greger provides no citations or proof here (no surprise for those that follow any of Dr. Greger) and goes on to say that the number one cause of death in the United States is the American Diet. Well, [according to the CDC](#) the number one cause of death is not diet and rather is heart disease. We must consider other factors that could contribute to heart disease such as genetics, other comorbidities, lifestyle choices such as smoking, other medications or drug use, environment, and of course stress. This is all to say, food is not the sole cause of any disease, and food is not the enemy. By fear mongering various foods this documentary is only making people feel bad about what they are eating. This is not empowering people to eat more plant-based in any capacity. Rather it is fueling the fire that is diet culture and stoking the flames that places moral value on food. Eat the dairy (if you like) and remember that you are not a bad person for doing so.

Let's continue - at one point in the docuseries, we hear that eating meat is killing the planet. According to the documentary, agriculture is responsible for 31% of greenhouse gas emissions as compared with 14% from the transportation sector. The EPA has [different numbers](#) – agriculture sector at 11% and transportation sector at 29%. I will not argue that various foods have different effects on the environment and some foods are better for the planet than others – indeed much research exists in this regard. That said, it is important to remember that eating any amount of plant based is better than not. We do not need to shame people for eating foods they prefer, they can afford, they have access to, or are most convenient.

The documentary discusses the fishing industry where eating fish is demonized completely. Farmed salmon is compared to pizza and bacon, claiming that the fish is fatter than both, and they are not the “good oils” but rather are the omega 6’s. I could cue an entire rant about seed oils and the fear monger that has ensued over the last couple years here, but we can save that for another time. Here is the cliff notes version of my thoughts on seed oils: the research that currently exists on seed oils is very conflicting and most of the studies showing omega 6 oils as inflammatory have been completed on rodents (which cannot be extrapolated to humans). Several studies on humans have shown no correlation between diets high in polyunsaturated fatty acids (aka seed oils/omega 6 fatty acids) and inflammatory markers. So have the seed oils. They are not the enemy (and most of the time, they are more affordable).

Back to the fish and documentary – I found it very interesting that the documentary discussed food deserts, food insecurity earlier and then goes on to show the twins throwing out perfectly good fish because they find it “diseased” based on the fish fear mongering segment. What a contradiction. The documentary did do a fairly good job at discussing food deserts, so I was rather saddened to see the display of food waste so prominently. The documentary is really pushing vegan propaganda!

So, what did the twin study even find? Is eating vegan *that* much better for our health and cardiometabolic metrics?

Yes, and no.

From the research results, the LDL cholesterol (aka “bad” cholesterol) had a greater reduction in the vegan twins as compared to their omnivore counterparts. However, the vegan twins also had a greater decrease in HDL cholesterol (aka “good” cholesterol) and their triglycerides increased more than the omnivore twins – which is not a good thing. We want a lower LDL cholesterol level, triglyceride level, and high HDL cholesterol. The vegan group also had a better fasting insulin level, which certainly is a good thing. That said, we must remember that we can improve insulin and glucose levels in our body through pairing foods together (eating carbohydrates, which affect glucose levels, with fats or proteins) and finding joyful movement/physical activity. The other significant metric the study found was in a reduction of weight. The vegan twins lost a greater amount of weight than the omnivore counterparts, however both groups did lose weight over the 8 weeks. It is important to note that the vegan twins lost greater amounts of muscle mass as compared with the omnivore twins, which is not necessarily a good thing.

Keep in mind that this study was small, short term, and mostly female gender dominated. There was also zero follow up. We have no clue what the twins’ longer-term effects will be, if any. At face value, we must be skeptical of the studies’ claims and results. How can researchers possibly control other life

experiences each twin has faced, such as differences in weight stigma/bias, stress levels they have endured, and other factors such as sleep, and physical activity? The answer is they cannot.

In summary, Netflix's *You Are What You Eat* is an ad for vegan diet where we hear from "experts" that go unchallenged. The series is flawed and biased in every sense. Although I will not disagree with everything that was presented in the series and the study, we must regard the series through a critical lens and examine the information that is being presented. For many people, eating vegan 100% of the time is unrealistic, restrictive, unenjoyable, and ultimately unsustainable. Furthermore, we cannot preach food equity and fear monger certain foods at the same time. It does not work that way. And finally, we must also consider the psychological impacts food can have on us if we truly want to consider the health benefits of eating a certain way.

As always, as a dietitian, I strongly encourage those that are considering starting a new diet, either in the pursuit of health or weight loss, to consider several factors before starting: is this diet realistic? Is this diet sustainable? What am I hoping to achieve from being on a diet? What barriers might there be that would keep me from following this diet? And of course, can we consider the 'grey space' when talking about vegan/omnivore diets? In other words, can we eat in a way that is plant forward, without having rigid rules about what we are eating.

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