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FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS:

DIETARY RESTRICTIONS

These *Frequently Asked Questions* (FAQs) are designed to help Peace Corps applicants with dietary restrictions such as vegetarianism to assess their readiness for Peace Corps service. The responses are designed to educate and prepare applicants for the challenges that may be related to their dietary restrictions. If you have such restrictions, please thoughtfully consider the potential impact of Peace Corps service on your diet.

QUESTION: Are dietary restrictions in Peace Corps service a big deal?

ANSWER: In order to be healthy and safe during your service, it is our responsibility to advise you on appropriate expectations for serving with dietary restrictions. While maintaining a particular diet does not mean that you cannot serve successfully as a Volunteer, we would like to be certain that you have considered the various challenges to maintaining your diet in many of the countries where Peace Corps Volunteers live and serve. Please carefully consider if and how you could maintain your diet overseas.

QUESTION: Being a vegetarian won't cause a problem; vegetables are available everywhere, right?

ANSWER: The availability of vegetables, grains, fruits, and other food items essential to a vegetarian diet varies greatly among Peace Corps countries. While we are not asking you to change who you are, we do encourage you to be flexible about your dietary preferences in order to best meet the challenges associated with your Peace Corps service.

Over the years, many vegetarians have served successfully as Volunteers. While some have found adequate food items in the country's diet, many more have had to adjust their diets in order to remain healthy and maintain good relations within their communities. *All Peace Corps volunteers will need to make adjustments to their diet.* Since Peace Corps cannot guarantee you an assignment that will enable you to maintain your dietary preference, we ask that you consider how you will handle serving in a country where your dietary restrictions could pose health or cross-cultural challenges.

QUESTION: Why does my diet matter to Peace Corps?

ANSWER: Integrating into your community may require you to participate in cultural events that include eating common and/or uncommon meats (e.g., pork, beef, horse, etc.) and a variety of foods that may be unfamiliar to you. Furthermore, protein intake through meat may be necessary in order for you to stay healthy. Please note that Peace Corps will send Volunteers home for medical reasons if they show signs of malnutrition.

QUESTION: I found information online stating that my dietary restrictions are not a problem in many countries. Why isn't that information sufficient for/relevant to my Peace Corps Service?

ANSWER: Travel information intended for tourists that include dietary recommendations does not apply to Peace Corps service. You will most likely live in a community that is remote and/or rural and has little in common with high-traffic tourist areas. Foods available to a Volunteer in one site may be completely different from a Volunteer in another site within the same post.

Thoughtful consideration and discussion of the scenarios and questions below will strengthen your preparation for Peace Corps service worldwide:

Scenario 1: Tomorrow is market day in your village and you are looking forward to preparing dishes in your kitchen that are familiar to you. Since your arrival most of your meals have been with local families and have been cooked in some sort of meat broth or have included chunks of meat served with a side of white rice or boiled manioc. You wander through the market and greet the women who are crouched over small portions of small dried fish, hot peppers and corn meal. The only vegetables you see are a few small onions.

Question: Have you ever had to modify your diet because the types of food you require were not available? If so, how did you adjust to this modification?

Question: What are your dietary restrictions? What are your reasons for maintaining this diet?

Scenario 2: After living with a host family during your three months of training, you arrive at your rural site to find a weekly market with a limited selection of vegetables. You are very pleased to see that you have access to select vegetables and do not see any reason to make the four-hour trip to a neighboring city each week just to buy a wider variety.

After a few months at site you begin to experience headaches quite frequently, intense stomach pains, and are bruising easily. The protein powder your mom was going to send you in the mail never arrived. The symptoms become more intense until you finally decide to seek medical attention at the Peace Corps office in the capital.

You meet with the Peace Corps Medical Officer (PCMO), who diagnoses you with both iron and protein deficiencies. S/He requests that you begin eating meat, eggs, dairy, and different vegetables to improve your health and avoid future concerns. You are kept under observation in the capital for a few days until your condition has noticeably improved and you have arranged an appropriate nutrition plan to adequately follow at site.

Question: In what ways are you willing to adjust your diet in order to remain healthy throughout your 27 months of Peace Corps service?

Scenario 3: After an exhausting 16-hour journey, you arrive in-country. Shortly thereafter, you and your luggage are delivered to your host family. To celebrate your arrival in their country and home, your host family prepares a traditional, festive meal. One of the few phrases you know how to say in the local language is "I am a vegetarian," and you are sure there will be meatless dishes at dinner. However, when you sit at the table you are faced with plates of sausage, jellied chicken, layered fish salad, and cabbage stuffed with rice and meat. As your host mother starts to serve you, you again say, "I'm a vegetarian." She looks at you blankly for a moment and continues to serve you large portions of meat and there are no vegetarian options available.

Question: How might you respond in situations where you have no control over the food you are offered to eat and/or people in your community provide only meat options?