Podcast: Why do so many people who start a vegetarian diet not stick to it?

Eating less meat is good for your health and the environment. Now a new study suggests genes may play a role in people’s ability to stick to a strict vegetarian diet.

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[ALLISON] AUBREY: Dr. [Nabeel] Yaseen and his colleague carried out what’s known as a genome-wide association study to identify snips or tiny differences in people’s DNA that are statistically associated with a particular trait – in this case, adhering to a strict vegetarian diet.

YASEEN: You are looking for – essentially, for markers in the genome. So we found one snip that is significantly associated with vegetarianism. And we look at – around, you know – what are the genes that are around it.

AUBREY: They found three genes most strongly associated with vegetarianism, and two of these have important functions in lipid or fat metabolism. The study can’t answer exactly how they shape the trait of strict vegetarianism, but Dr. Yaseen has some ideas.

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YASEEN: One hypothesis, which is highly speculative, is maybe there is a lipid nutrient in meat that some people need and others don’t.

AUBREY: Of course, what we eat is shaped by a bunch of factors – from our taste preferences to our budgets and culture. And Dr. Yaseen says this is just the beginning of understanding the role of genetics.

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