

Vegetarian Diet for Children and Teens

A well-planned vegetarian diet can provide all the calories, protein, vitamins and minerals a child needs to grow and develop. This handout will help you plan this diet for your child.

Types of Vegetarian Diets

There are many diet options for people who want to eat less meat. Vegetarian diets are named for the foods that are eaten.

- Semi-vegetarians, or flexitarians, eat a plant-based diet most of the time. They may include meat, poultry and fish every now and then.
- Pesco-vegetarians eat plants, dairy, eggs and fish. They avoid red meat and poultry.
- Lacto-ovo vegetarians eat plants, dairy and eggs. They avoid red meat, poultry and fish.
- Lacto-vegetarians eat plants and dairy. They avoid eggs, red meat, poultry and fish.
- Vegans eat only plant foods. They avoid all foods of animal origin.

A vegan diet is much more limited in food choices. You will need to plan your meals well to make sure your child gets the nutrients they need.

Calories

Your child needs calories from food to grow and develop. Vegetarian diets are often high in fiber, which can cause young children to feel full before they have eaten enough calories.

Ideas to Increase Calories

- Spread hummus or nut butters on breads, vegetables and fruits.
- Offer granola cereals and dried fruits.

- Add avocado, olives, nuts or seeds to dishes (be careful if you give nuts or seeds to children under 5 as these are choking hazards).
- Cook with healthy fats like olive oil or canola oil.
- Use beans and peas in stews, soups and casseroles. Prepare tofu or other meat substitutes.

Just like diets that contain meat, vegetarian diets can be unhealthy if there are too many full-fat dairy products and refined starches.

Protein

Protein from food helps build and maintain body tissues. A well-planned vegetarian diet can provide enough protein. The key is to include different kinds of protein foods. This ensures that you get all the amino acids or protein building blocks that your body needs. Most cow milk substitutes (coconut, almond, rice milk), except soy milk, have only a small amount of protein.

Good sources of protein include:

- Veggie burgers
- Tofu and other soy based products
- Texturized vegetable protein
- Cauliflower used as a meat substitute
- Beans or lentils
- Nuts or seeds
- Nut butter
- Hummus
- Cow, soy or pea protein based milk
- Cottage cheese or cheese
- Greek yogurt
- Eggs

Calcium

You need calcium for strong bones and teeth. Dairy products are the most common sources. Leafy green vegetables, nuts and beans also contain small amounts. Fortified non-dairy milks, juices and cereals are also good ways to add calcium to a vegan diet.

Good sources of calcium include:

- Cow's milk
- Fortified soy, almond, rice, oat milk
- Yogurt
- Fortified orange juice
- Tofu (made with calcium sulfate), ½ cup
- Cheese
- Cottage cheese
- Ice cream or frozen yogurt
- Cooked greens (spinach, collard greens, bok choy)
- Cooked broccoli, soybeans/edamame
- Almonds
- Blackstrap molasses

Iron

Children require high amounts of iron. The iron in plant foods is not absorbed as well as the iron in animal foods. Try to include foods with vitamin C along with iron rich plant foods at the same meal. Vitamin C can help the body absorb more of the iron.

Cooking with non-enameled cast iron pans may also help improve iron intake. If you give your child an iron supplement, do not give it with dairy products, which can limit the amount of iron the body absorbs.

Good sources of Vitamin C include:

- Broccoli
- Strawberries and other berries
- Citrus fruits and juices
- Melons
- Potatoes
- Spinach
- Tomatoes

- Kiwi
- Colored peppers

Good sources of iron include:

- Bran flakes
- Oatmeal (fortified)
- Cream of wheat
- Baked potato with skin
- Lentils, kidney, lima or navy beans
- Soybeans
- Tofu
- Spinach kale
- Dried prunes/plums/apricots/raisins
- Whole wheat bread
- Cashews, walnuts, Brazil nuts

Zinc

Meats are the best source of zinc in our diets. Nuts, beans, wheat germ, tofu, dairy products and whole grain pastas, cereals, and breads also supply zinc. Enriched bread products are not good sources of zinc.

Vitamins

Children who eat many types of fruits and vegetables as well as whole grains, beans, nuts and seeds should be getting enough of most essential vitamins. Vitamin B12 and vitamin D are exceptions.

Vitamin B12

Vitamin B12 is found only in animal products. A vegetarian diet that includes milk products and/or eggs will supply enough B12. Children who follow a vegan diet (no animal products) will need to take a B12 supplement or eat food products that have added B12.

Products Fortified with Vitamin B12

- Some non-dairy milks
- Ready-to-eat breakfast cereals
- Meat substitutes (such as veggie burgers)

- Nutritional yeast (Red Star Vegetarian Support Formula). Non-supplemented yeasts do not contain vitamin B12. Although it may take months or years for a B12 deficiency to appear, it is very serious.

Vitamin D

The body can make vitamin D when skin is exposed to sunlight. Most children need to take a vitamin D supplement, especially in the winter. Ask your health care provider or dietitian.

Food Sources of Vitamin D

- Fortified milk
- Fortified ready-to-eat cereals
- Some mushrooms
- Fatty fish like salmon

Tips

Give your child many types of foods like fruits, vegetables, whole grain breads and cereals, legumes, nuts and seeds, milk and cheese.

For the first few months of life, feed infants breast milk or store-bought soy or cow's milk formula alone. This will provide the nutrition they need.

Supplement the diet with breast milk or formula until about 12 months of age. This will make sure they get the protein they need.

Use whole grain products to increase intake of iron, zinc and fiber. Whole grains include whole wheat, bulgur, barley, brown rice, cornmeal and oatmeal.

Consult a dietitian/nutritionist to help you plan a vegetarian diet that is right for your family and fulfills your child's nutrient needs.

To Learn More

[15 Vegetarian Recipes That Kids Will Love \(allrecipes.com\)](http://allrecipes.com)

Kids Health at <http://www.kidshealth.org> (search for "vegetarian")

The Vegetarian Resource group at <http://www.vrg.org/>

Who to Call

If you are a UW Health patient and have more questions, please contact UW Health at the phone number listed below. You can also visit our website at www.uwhealth.org/nutrition.

Nutrition clinics for UW Hospital and American Family Children's
(608) 890-5500

Your health care team may have given you this information as part of your care. If so, please use it and call if you have any questions. If this information was not given to you as part of your care, please check with your doctor. This is not medical advice. This is not to be used for diagnosis or treatment of any medical condition. Because each person's health needs are different, you should talk with your doctor or others on your health care team when using this information. If you have an emergency, please call 911. Copyright © 11/2023. University of Wisconsin Hospitals and Clinics Authority. All rights reserved. Produced by the Clinical Nutrition Services Department and the Department of Nursing. HF#198