

Vegetarian diets - Keeping a healthy balance

People choose to follow a vegetarian diet for a variety of reasons. For example concern about the environment, animal welfare, health concerns and religious beliefs. Whatever your reason, it's important to plan your diet carefully to make sure you're getting all the nutrients your body requires.

Types of vegetarian diets

Vegetarians typically don't eat meat, poultry, fish or shellfish. However different types of vegetarian diets exist:

Lacto-ovo vegetarians – eat dairy foods and eggs but not meat, poultry or seafood.

Ovo-vegetarians – include eggs but avoid all other animal foods, including dairy.

Lacto-vegetarians – eat dairy foods but exclude eggs, meat, poultry and seafood.

Vegans – don't eat any animal products at all, including honey.

Slight variations to these diets include pescetarians who include fish and/ or shellfish, while semi-vegetarians (or flexitarians) occasionally eat meat or poultry.

Vegetarian eating for optimum health

No matter what type of vegetarian diet you eat, the healthy eating recommendations provided in the government's Eatwell Plate still apply to you. This includes eating plenty of fruit, vegetables and starchy foods such as bread, cereals and potatoes; moderate amounts of alternatives to meat and fish; some dairy foods or alternatives (such as fortified soya milk and yoghurts); and small amounts of foods high in fat and/ or sugar.*

The eatwell plate

Use the eatwell plate to help you get the balance right. It shows how much of what you eat should come from each food group.



Well planned vegetarian diets can be both nutritious and healthy. They have been associated with lower risks of heart disease, type 2 diabetes, obesity, certain types of cancer and lower blood cholesterol levels. However when cutting out animal products there are some specific nutrients you need to consider:



Protein

Protein is made up of a variety of building blocks called amino acids. Some amino acids are essential as the body can't make them itself. While proteins from animal sources contain the complete mix of essential amino acids, few plants do. Soya, quinoa and hemp are the few plant foods containing all the essential amino acids. Most other plant proteins provide some, with each plant providing a different combination. So, as long as you're eating a mixture of different plant proteins over the course of a day, you'll be getting all the essential amino acids your body needs.

If you eat dairy foods, make sure you don't over rely on cheese for your protein. If you do, you may end up having too much unhealthy saturated fat in your diet.

Vegetarian sources of protein:-

- Beans, lentils and chickpeas
- Soya and soya products e.g. soya dairy alternatives, tofu, soya nuts and soya mince
- Seeds
- Nuts and nut butters (e.g. peanut butter)
- Grains such as wheat (found in cereals, pasta and bread), rice and maize

If you eat them:-

- Eggs
- Milk and dairy products (yoghurts and cheese)
- Mycoprotein such as Quorn (has added egg)



Iron

Although red meat is the richest and most easily absorbed source of iron, a number of plant foods can make a significant contribution. To top up your iron levels eat plenty of:

- Fortified breakfast cereals
- Dried fruit
- Beans and lentils
- Leafy green vegetables
- Sesame seeds
- Nuts
- Wholemeal bread

While there are many benefits to eating a vegetarian diet, there's more to it than just giving up meat.

To help your body absorb iron from plant foods, include a source of Vitamin C with your meal. Good options are vegetables, fruit or a glass of fruit juice.

* Read more about the eatwell plate on our Healthy Eating Fact Sheet

Calcium

Dairy foods are a rich source of calcium. If you're not eating these, make sure you're eating plenty of the following to keep your calcium intake up:

- Tofu
- Calcium-fortified foods e.g. soya milk, yoghurts and puddings; rice/ oat drinks; and fruit juice
- Green leafy vegetables, especially kale and pak-choi, but not spinach. Although spinach contains calcium it is bound to a compound



called oxalate. This greatly reduces its absorption making it a poor source of usable calcium.

- Brown and white bread
- Sesame seeds and tahini
- Nuts
- Dried fruit e.g. apricots and figs

Vitamin D

Our bodies can make Vitamin D from sunlight during the spring and summer. At other times of the year it's important to try and eat foods that contain Vitamin D, such as:

- Most margarines
- Some fortified brands of soya milks, yoghurts and desserts – check the label
- A few fortified breakfast cereals – check the label



If you eat them:-

- Dried skimmed milk
- Fortified yoghurts
- Eggs

Additional supplements maybe needed if you rarely go outside,

have dark skin, are elderly or for children. This should be discussed with your doctor.

Vitamin B12 and B2

If you're eating eggs and dairy foods then getting enough Vitamin B12 and B2 shouldn't be a problem. Vegans should consider including fortified foods containing Vitamin B12 and B2 (check the label). To top up your vitamin B12 and B2 vitamin levels eat plenty of:



- Yeast extract
- Soya milk, yoghurts and desserts
- Breakfast cereals
- Certain brands of rice drinks and oat drinks (check the label)

Other considerations

Omega-3 fats are important for good health. There are two types of Omega-3s: long versions found in oily fish - docosahexaenoic acid (DHA) and eicosapentaenoic acid (EPA), and the short versions: Alpha Linolenic Acid (ALA) from vegetable oils – particularly flaxseed, walnut, rapeseed and soya oils.

The long Omega-3 fats are particularly good for us and current advice recommends eating two portions of fish a week. The different short Omega-3 fat may not have the same benefits. Although our bodies can convert some ALA into EPA and DHA, the conversion isn't very efficient. If you don't eat fish, you might want to consider a supplement made from algae derived DHA.

Meat, fish and nuts are good sources of selenium. If you're not eating meat or fish make sure you include some nuts into your diet. Brazil nuts are a particularly good source. If you're a vegan include small amounts of iodised salt or sea vegetables for your iodine.



Extra care is needed during pregnancy, breastfeeding, weaning or in childhood to make sure that all nutritional needs are being met. Additional dietary advice may be needed.



Summary

Well planned vegetarian diets are appropriate for all stages of life. While there are many benefits to eating a vegetarian diet, there's more to it than just giving up meat.

These guidelines will help you enjoy all the health benefits of being a vegetarian, as well as ensure you're eating a nutritious and complete diet.



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