

Healthy Eating for Vegetarians

People are vegetarians for many reasons, including concern for personal health and the environment, economic and world hunger concerns, compassion for animals, belief in nonviolence, food preferences, or spiritual reasons. People may become vegetarians for one reason, and then later on adopt some of the other reasons as well.

Broadly defined, a vegetarian is a person who does not eat meat, poultry, and fish. Vegetarians eat mainly fruit, vegetables, legumes, grains, seeds, and nuts. Many vegetarians eat eggs and/or dairy products but avoid hidden animal products such as beef and chicken stocks, lard, and gelatin.

The American Dietetic Association (ADA) classifies vegetarians more specifically in the following ways:

- **Vegans or strict vegetarians** exclude all animal products (e.g. meat, poultry, fish, eggs, milk, cheese, and other dairy products). Many vegans also do not eat honey.
- **Lactovegetarians** exclude meat, poultry, fish, and eggs but include dairy products.
- **Lacto-ovovegetarians** exclude meat, poultry, and fish but include dairy products and eggs. Most vegetarians in the US are lacto-ovovegetarians.

HEALTH BENEFITS OF A VEGETARIAN DIET

According to the ADA, vegetarians are at lower risk for developing heart disease; cancers (colorectal, ovarian, and breast cancer), diabetes, obesity, and hypertension (high blood pressure). This is because a healthy vegetarian diet is typically low in fat and high in fiber; however, even a vegetarian diet can be high in fat if it includes excessive amounts of fatty snack foods, fried foods, whole milk dairy products, and eggs. Therefore, a vegetarian diet, like any healthy diet, must be well planned in order to help prevent and treat certain diseases. Just like any other diet, we recommend following the guidelines of the Food Guide Pyramid.

Though being a vegetarian can be a healthy lifestyle, care needs to be taken that this is not a step towards a generally more restrictive, disordered eating pattern.

GETTING PROPER NUTRITION

The key to any healthy diet is to choose a wide variety of foods, and to consume enough calories to meet your energy needs. It is important for vegetarians to pay attention to these five categories in particular.

Protein – Protein is found in both plant foods and animal foods. The ADA has said that it is NOT necessary to combine specific foods within a meal in order to "complete" the amino acids profile of the proteins found in plant foods. Eating a wide variety of foods and enough calories during the day will fulfill your protein needs. Good sources of protein include whole grains, lentils, beans, tofu, low-fat dairy products, nuts, seeds, tempeh, eggs, and peas.

Calcium – The ADA recommends consuming at least 1300 mg of calcium per day, which is the equivalent of over 4 cups of milk or yogurt. Vegetarians can meet their calcium needs by consuming adequate amounts of low-fat and fat-free dairy products such as milk, yogurt, and cheese. Calcium is also found in many plant foods including dark, leafy greens (e.g. spinach, kale, mustard, collard and turnip greens, and bok choy), beans, broccoli, dried figs, and sunflower seeds, as well as in calcium-

fortified cereals, cereal bars and some juices. Vegans (people who do not eat any animal products) must strive to meet their daily calcium requirements by regularly including these plant sources of calcium in their diets. Many soy milk products are fortified with calcium, but be sure to check the label for this. You can also include a calcium supplement in your diet.

Vitamin D – Vitamin D helps your body absorb and use calcium. There are few foods that are naturally high in vitamin D. Dairy products in the US are fortified with vitamin D. Many soy milk products are also fortified with vitamin D. Your body can make its own vitamin D, but only when the skin is exposed to adequate sunlight (but that can have its own risks). People who do not consume dairy products and who do not receive direct exposure to sunlight regularly should consider taking vitamin D. This supplement should contain no more than 100% of the Recommended Daily Value, however, because larger doses can be dangerous.

Iron – Iron-fortified breads and cereals, dark green vegetables (e.g. spinach and broccoli), dried fruits, prune juice, blackstrap molasses, pumpkin seeds, sesame seeds, and soybean nuts are good plant sources of iron. Consuming foods high in vitamin C, such as citrus fruits or juices, tomatoes, and green peppers helps your body absorb iron from these plant sources. Cooking food in iron pots and pans will also add to your iron intake.

Vitamin B-12 – Vitamin B-12 is produced in animals and by bacteria in the soil. Vegetarians who consume dairy products and/or eggs usually get enough B-12 from these foods. Vegans should add vitamin B-12 fortified soy milk to their diets. Regularly taking a broad-spectrum multivitamin and mineral supplement will also supply the necessary amount of B-12.

WHAT ABOUT ATHLETES?

Being both an athlete and a vegetarian can be challenging, especially for vegans. It can be difficult to eat a volume of food high enough to meet an athlete's high caloric needs. Vegetarians who participate in sports should be aware of their increased energy needs and should make a concerted effort to consume sufficient calories.

BECOMING A VEGETARIAN

Some people stop eating meat "cold turkey." Others may prefer to make dietary changes more gradually. Whatever way you choose to make the change, you can begin to achieve the health benefits of vegetarianism by significantly cutting down on the amount of meats consumed, and making vegetables, fruits, legumes, and whole grains the focus of your meals. The ADA suggests the following tips for following a vegetarian diet:

- Choose whole-grain products (e.g. whole wheat bread, brown rice, or whole-grain cereals) instead of refined or white grains.
- Eat a wide variety of foods.
- If you eat dairy products, choose non-fat or low-fat varieties.
- Limit intake of eggs to 3-4 yolks/week.
- Limit intake of sweets and high fat foods.
- When shopping, plan ahead. Shop with a list and read food labels.
- Many vegetarian foods can be found in any grocery store. Specialty food stores may carry some of the more uncommon items, as well as many vegetarian convenience foods.

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FOODS TO HAVE ON HAND

Becoming a vegetarian can be as easy as you choose to make it. Whether you enjoy preparing elaborate meals or choose quick and easy ones, vegetarian meals can be very satisfying. In order to make meal preparation easier, the ADA suggests having the following foods on hand:

- Ready-to-eat, whole-grain breakfast cereals, and quick-cooking whole-grain cereals such as oatmeal
- Whole-grain breads and crackers, such as rye, whole wheat, and mixed grain
- Other grains such as barley and bulgur wheat
- Canned beans, such as pinto, black beans, and garbanzo beans
- Rice (including brown, wild, etc.)
- Pasta (now available in whole wheat, spinach, and other flavors) with tomato sauce and canned beans and/or chopped veggies
- Corn or flour tortillas
- Vegetarian soups like lentil or minestrone
- Plain frozen vegetables
- Frozen fruit juice concentrate
- Nut spreads (e.g. peanut or almond butter)
- Canned and frozen fruit

LINKS

Food and Nutrition Information Center

<http://www.nal.usda.gov/fnic/etext/000058.html>

American Dietetic Association

<http://www.andrews.edu/NUFS/>

UR Dining Services

<http://www.rochester.edu/living/services/dining/vege.php>