



Understanding Vegetarian Diets

Did You Know?

There are various reasons a person may choose to become a vegetarian, including:

Health benefits- A well planned vegetarian diet may provide several health benefits.

Environmental concerns- Many people believe that meat production is environmentally unsustainable. Therefore, a vegetarian diet may help protect the environment.

Religious reasons- Some religious groups are traditionally vegetarian.

Financial matters- Plant foods are often less expensive than animal foods.

Ethical concerns- Some people are against killing animals for food.

No matter what the reason is for choosing a vegetarian diet, it is important to make smart choices to ensure you meet your nutritional needs.



A vegetarian is a person who does not eat meat or animal products, but the types of vegetarian diets can differ greatly. A well planned vegetarian diet can be healthful, nutritionally adequate, and may provide health benefits.

Types of Vegetarian Diets

- **Vegans or total vegetarians:** Eat only plant foods
- **Lacto-vegetarians:** Eat plant foods as well as dairy products
- **Lacto-ovo vegetarians:** Eat plant foods, dairy products and eggs
- **Semi-vegetarians:** Don't eat red meat but may include chicken or seafood with plant foods, dairy products, and eggs

Vegetarianism and Health

The key to a healthy vegetarian diet is to eat a **wide variety** of foods and the right amount of foods to meet your nutritional needs. Nutritional requirements are the same for vegetarians and non-vegetarians, but some nutrients require special attention.

Compared to non-vegetarians, vegetarians tend to eat:

- Fewer **overall calories**
- Fewer **calories from fat** (particularly saturated fat)
- Higher amounts of fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and nuts

Health Benefits:

A well planned vegetarian diet may provide several potential **health benefits** such as:

- Lower levels of obesity
- Reduced risk for heart disease
- Lower blood pressure
- Lower rates of hypertension, type 2 diabetes, and some forms of cancer

Key Nutrients of a Vegetarian Diet

People on vegetarian diets generally receive adequate amounts of most nutrients. However, there are some nutrients that may be lacking. Here are some examples:

Protein – This is needed for growth and maintenance of body tissues. **Protein** is found in many plant sources, such as whole grains, vegetables, seeds, nuts, soy products, and other legumes like beans and lentils. It is also found in dairy and eggs. Most vegetarians get adequate **protein** if calorie intake is adequate, and sources are varied.

Omega 3 Fatty acids – These may reduce the risk for cardiovascular disease, improve cognitive function and vision, and fight inflammation in the body. **Omega 3 fatty acids** are primarily found in fish and enriched eggs. Some plant foods (like flaxseed, walnuts, canola oil, and soy) also contain compounds that can be converted to Omega 3 fatty acids, but not very efficiently. Vegetarian fish oil supplements are available, but be sure to consult your physician before initiating.

Calcium – This is needed for strong bones and teeth, blood clotting, and normal muscle and nerve function. Most **calcium** comes from milk and milk products. If dairy is avoided, calcium can be found in milk substitutes (soy, rice, or almond “milk”), dark green leafy vegetables (broccoli, bok choy, chinese cabbage, collards, kale), soybeans, and fortified orange juice.

Vitamin D – This is required to absorb calcium from the digestive tract and to incorporate calcium into bones and teeth. A few of the best sources of **vitamin D** are fortified milk and milk substitutes, fortified breakfast cereals, and egg yolks. It can even be found in some mushrooms! We also get vitamin D from the sun, but a supplement may be needed if dietary sources and sun exposure are inadequate.

Vitamin B12 – This is needed for red blood cell formation and nerve function. **Vitamin B12** is found in animal products like dairy and eggs, some nutritional yeast, fortified cereals and soy products, and most milk substitutes. Vegans may need a supplement.

Iron – This is a crucial component of red blood cells. The best plant sources of **iron** are dark leafy greens, dried fruit, fortified cereals, and beans. **Iron** is not absorbed as well from plants, so it's helpful to eat these with sources of vitamin C like citrus, strawberries, broccoli, Brussels sprouts, bell peppers, or tomatoes.

Zinc – This is important for the immune system, wound healing, and proper growth and development. **Zinc** is found in soy products, legumes, grains, cheese and nuts. Like iron, **zinc** can be better absorbed when eaten with foods rich in vitamin C.

Iodine – This helps to regulate metabolism, also growth and function of many key organs. Some vegetarians may be at risk for iodine deficiency. Vegetarians can get **iodine** from iodized salt, seaweeds, soybeans, sweet potatoes, broccoli and cabbage.