



Vegetarianism

Vegetarianism is a popular choice for many individuals and families. But parents may wonder if kids can safely follow a vegetarian diet and still get all necessary nutrients. Most dietary and medical experts agree that a well-planned vegetarian diet can actually be a very healthy way to eat.

But special care must be taken when serving kids and teens a vegetarian diet, especially if it doesn't include dairy and egg products. And as with any diet, you'll need to understand that the nutritional needs of kids change as they grow.

Types of Vegetarian Diets

Before your child or family switches to a vegetarian diet, it's important to note that all vegetarian diets are not alike. Major vegetarian categories include:

- **lacto-ovo vegetarian:** eats no meat, poultry, or fish, but does eat eggs and dairy products (what most of us mean when we say "vegetarian")
- **lacto-vegetarian:** eats no meat, poultry, fish, or eggs, but does eat dairy products
- **ovo-vegetarian:** eats no meat, poultry, fish, or dairy products, but does eat eggs
- **vegan:** eats only plant-derived foods

And many other people are semi-vegetarians who have eliminated red meat, but may eat poultry or fish.

The Choice of Vegetarianism

Kids or families may follow a vegetarian diet for a variety of reasons. Younger vegetarians are usually part of a family that eats vegetarian meals for health, cultural, or other reasons. Older kids may decide to become vegetarians because of concern for animals, the environment, or their own health.

In most cases, you shouldn't be alarmed if your child chooses vegetarianism. Discuss what it means and how to implement it, ensuring your child makes healthy and nutritious food choices.

Nutrition for All Ages

Your doctor or a registered dietitian can help you plan and monitor a healthy vegetarian diet. Parents should give their kids a variety of foods that provide enough calories and nutrients to enable them to grow normally.

A well-planned vegetarian diet can meet kids' nutritional needs and has some health benefits. For example, a diet rich in fruits and veggies will be high in fiber and low in fat, factors known to improve cardiovascular health by reducing blood cholesterol and maintaining a healthy weight. However, kids and teens on a vegetarian diet may need to be careful that they get an adequate amount of certain vitamins and minerals.

Here are nutrients that vegetarians should get and some of their best food sources:

- **vitamin B12:** dairy products, eggs, and vitamin-fortified products, such as cereals, breads, and soy and rice drinks, and nutritional yeast
- **vitamin D:** milk, vitamin D-fortified orange juice, and other vitamin D-fortified products
- **calcium:** dairy products, dark green leafy vegetables, broccoli, dried beans, and calcium-fortified products, including orange juice, soy and rice drinks, and cereals
- **protein:** dairy products, eggs, tofu and other soy products, dried beans, and nuts
- **iron:** eggs, dried beans, dried fruits, whole grains, leafy green vegetables, and iron-fortified cereals and bread
- **zinc:** wheat germ, nuts, fortified cereal, dried beans, and pumpkin seeds

Depending on the type of vegetarian diet chosen, kids may miss out on some of these important nutrients if the diet isn't monitored by the parents. The less restrictive the vegetarian diet, the easier it will be for your child to get enough of the necessary nutrients. In some cases, fortified foods or supplements can help meet nutritional needs.

Vegetarian Infants

The main sources of protein and nutrients for infants are breast milk and formula (soy formula for vegan infants), especially in the first 6 months of life. Breastfed infant vegans should receive a source of vitamin B12 if the mother's diet isn't supplemented, and breastfed infants and infants drinking less than 32 ounces (1 liter) formula should get vitamin D supplements.

Guidelines for the introduction of solid foods are the same for vegetarian and nonvegetarian infants. Breastfed infants 6 months and older should receive iron from complementary foods, such as iron-fortified infant cereal.

Once an infant is introduced to solids, protein-rich vegetarian foods can include pureed tofu, cottage cheese, yogurt or soy yogurt, and pureed and strained legumes (legumes include beans, peas, chickpeas, and lentils).

Vegetarian Toddlers

Toddlers are already a challenge when it comes to eating. As they come off of breast milk or formula, kids are at risk for nutritional deficiencies. After the age of 1, strict vegan diets may not offer growing toddlers enough essential vitamins and minerals, such as vitamin D, vitamin B12, iron, calcium, and zinc.

So it's important to serve fortified cereals and nutrient-dense foods. Vitamin supplementation is recommended for young children whose diets may not provide adequate nutrients.

Toddlers are typically picky about which foods they'll eat and, as a result, some may not get enough calories from a vegetarian diet to thrive. For vegan toddlers, the amount of vegetables needed for proper nutrition and calories may be too bulky for their tiny stomachs.

During the picky toddler stage, it's important for vegetarian parents to make sure their young child eats enough calories. You can get enough fat and calories in a vegan child's diet, but you have to plan carefully.

Older Vegetarian Kids and Teens

Preteens and teens often voice their independence through the foods they choose to eat. One strong statement is the decision to stop eating meat. This is common among teens, who may decide to embrace vegetarianism in support of animal rights, for health reasons, or because friends are doing it.

If it's done right, a meat-free diet can actually be a good choice for adolescents, especially considering that vegetarians often eat more of the foods that most teens don't get enough of — fruits and vegetables.

A vegetarian diet that includes dairy products and eggs (lacto-ovo) is the best choice for growing teens. A more strict vegetarian diet may fail to meet a teen's need for certain nutrients, such as iron, zinc, calcium, and vitamins D and B12. If you're concerned that your child is not getting enough of these important nutrients, talk to your doctor, who may recommend a vitamin and mineral supplement.

The good news for young vegetarians — and their parents — is that many schools are offering vegetarian fare, including salad bars and other healthy vegetarian choices. Schools publish lists of upcoming lunch menus; be sure to scan them to see if your child will have a vegetarian choice. If not, you can pack lunch.

If your vegetarian preteen or teen would rather make his or her own school lunch or opts to buy lunch, keep in mind that your child's idea of a healthy vegetarian meal may be much different from yours (e.g., french fries and a soda). Talk to your child about the importance of eating right, especially when following a vegetarian diet.

Also be wary if your child has self-imposed a very restrictive diet. A teen with an eating disorder may drastically reduce calories or cut out all fat or carbohydrates and call it "vegetarianism" because it's considered socially acceptable and healthy.

Even if preteens or teens are approaching vegetarianism in a healthy way, it's still important for them to understand which nutrients might be missing in their diet. To support your child's dietary decision and promote awareness of the kinds of foods your preteen or teen should be eating, consider having the whole family eat a vegetarian meal at least one night a week.

A Healthy Lifestyle

A vegetarian diet can be a healthy choice for all kids, as long as it's properly planned.

The principles of planning a vegetarian diet are the same as planning any healthy diet — provide a variety of foods and include foods from all of the food groups. A balanced diet will provide the right combinations to meet nutritional needs. But be aware of potential nutrient deficiencies in your child's diet and figure out how you'll account for them. With a little exploration, you may find more vegetarian options than you realized.

If you aren't sure your child is getting all necessary nutrients or if you have any questions about vegetarian diets, check in with your family doctor, pediatrician, or a registered dietitian.

Reviewed by: Mary L. Gavin, MD

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Post Test – December 2019

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1. Most dietary and medical experts agree that a well-planned _____ diet can actually be a very healthy way to eat.
2. Lacto-vegetarian eats no meat, poultry, fish or egg, and does not eat dairy products either.
True or False?
3. _____: eats only plant-derived foods.
4. A diet rich in fruits and veggies will be high in _____ and low in _____.
5. The more restrictive the vegetarian diet, the easier it will be for your child to get enough of the necessary nutrients.
True or False?
6. Breastfed infants 6 months and older should receive _____ from complementary foods, such as iron-fortified infant cereal.
7. Strict vegan diets may not offer growing toddlers enough essential _____ and _____ such as vitamin D, vitamin B12, iron, calcium and zinc.
8. If it's done right, a meat-free diet can actually be a good choice for _____, especially considering that vegetarians often eat more of the foods that teens don't get enough of- fruits and vegetables.
9. A vegetarian diet that includes _____ products and _____ (lacto-ovo) is the best choice for growing teens.
10. Be aware of potential nutrient _____ in your child's diet and figure out how you'll account for them.

November 2019 Quiz Answers. 1.Salmonella 2.Raw Food 3.False
4.Illness/Hands 5.Cook/Food 6.Escherichia 7.True 8.Heat 9.Kidney
10.Recalls/Vegetables



Southwest Human Development Services
P.O. Box 28487 • Austin, Texas 78755-8487
(512) 467-7916 • Toll Free (800) 369-9082
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