What is a vegetarian diet?

Key points

- There are different types of vegetarian diets.
- Some nutrients are harder to get when following a vegetarian diet.
- Good planning is important to meet your nutritional needs.
- An Accredited Practising Dietitian (APD) can help you meet your nutrient needs.

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What is a vegetarian diet?

There are many different forms of vegetarian diets. All vegetarian diets prioritise foods that come from plants. They limit or avoid foods from animals. People follow vegetarian diets for a range of reasons – health, environmental, ethical, religious, or economic.

Vegetarian

Don't eat meat, poultry, fish, shellfish, and any by-products requiring animal slaughter. Prioritise fruit, vegetables, grains, legumes, nuts and seeds, and allow for dairy and eggs.

Ovo-vegetarian

Exclude meat, poultry, seafood and dairy from their diets. This diet includes eggs.

Lacto-vegetarian

Excludes meat, fish, poultry and eggs. Includes the consumption of dairy products like milk, cheese, yoghurt and butter.

Lacto-ovo-vegetarian

Excludes meat, fish and poultry. Includes the consumption of dairy products and eggs.

Pescatarian

Follows a vegetarian diet but include fish and other seafood as a main source of protein. Many pescatarians will also eat dairy and eggs, but this is an individual choice.

Vegan

Vegans don’t eat any animal products. Including bi-products such as honey, gelatine/collagen and carmine.

Ento-vegan

Ento-vegans follow a vegan diet. They also include edible insects in their diet for nutritional and environmental reasons

Health benefits of vegetarian diets

> *A varied and well-balanced vegetarian diet can supply all the nutrients needed for good health. You can match your vegetarian diet to meet the recommended dietary guidelines. Such as eating plenty of vegetables, fruits, legumes and whole grains.*

Healthy vegetarian diets may provide health benefits such as reduced chronic disease risk. It can help protect against:

- heart disease
- many types of cancer
- hypertension (high blood pressure) and stroke
- overweight and obesity
- type 2 diabetes
- constipation
- diverticular disease
- gallstones
- gout.

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What nutrients do I need to pay attention to?

The following nutrients may need more attention when following a vegetarian diet.

Iron

Important for producing blood and moving oxygen around the body. Found in legumes, tofu, nuts and seeds, whole grains, green leafy vegetables, and breakfast cereals with added iron. Taking vitamin C with your plant-based source of iron can help to boost absorption. Avoid tea and coffee within one hour of meals for better absorption.

Zinc

Important for growth and development, reproduction, vitamin A metabolism, night vision, appetite, taste sensation, a strong immune system, healthy skin, wound healing and hormone interactions.

Phytic acid and oxylates are compounds that can reduce absorption of some minerals including zinc. Unrefined grains, legumes, nuts and seeds and certain other plants can have these compounds. They are reduced with cooking and/or processing.



Sources of zinc for vegetarians include legumes, nuts and seeds, dairy, eggs and whole grains (bread and cereal).

Tips to increase absorption:

- Soak legumes before cooking.
- Eat canned legumes or legume pasta.
- Eat fruits and vegetables with meals.
- Eat sprouted beans, grains and seeds.
- Avoid tea and coffee around meals.

Vitamin B12

Important for cell division, forming red blood cells and nerve function. Animal products including eggs and dairy are sources of B12. Plant-based sources include B-12 fortified plant-based milk, nutritional yeast and meat alternatives. Fermented foods such kimchi, sauerkraut and miso may also contain traces of B12, but they are not a sufficient source on their own.

It's recommended that vegans take a B12 supplement to ensure adequacy. B12 found in algae and seaweed such as spirulina is inactive and cannot replace supplements.

Calcium

Important for strong bones and teeth, nerve and muscle function and forming blood clots.

Calcium-rich foods include:

- legumes
- peas

- fortified plant-based milk
- calcium set tofu
- blackstrap molasses
- unhulled tahini
- green leafy vegetables (especially broccoli, watercress, kale, spinach and Asian greens)
- certain nuts and seeds (for example, almonds, chia seeds)
- fortified or homemade non-dairy yoghurt (made with fortified milk)
- certain fruits (figs, berries and oranges).

Omega-3 fats

Important for general health and to protect against disease.

Fish and seafood provide the long-chain form of omega-3 used by the body. Seaweed is also a good source of omega-3 fats.

Plant foods including flaxseeds, chia seeds and hemp seeds and their oils provide short-chain omega-3 fats.

Our body makes very small amounts of long-chain omega-3 fats from short-chain omega-3 fats, so it’s essential to get them from your diet.

You can take a vegan (algal-based) omega-3 supplement to be sure you're getting enough long-chain omega-3 fats. It's recommended that vegetarian pregnant women and young children take an omega-3 supplement.

Vitamin D

Vitamin D is a must for optimal bone health and the immune system. You can get vitamin D from exposing your skin to the sun for 15 minutes per day, or by taking a supplement such as a vegan-friendly D3 supplement derived from lichen. Some plant-based milk and margarine are fortified with vitamin D. Eggs can also be a source of vitamin D.

Nutritious food choices for vegetarians

When following a vegetarian diet try to incorporate nutritious food choices such as:

- eggs, legumes (dried or canned beans or chickpeas), lentils
- tofu, tempeh

- wholegrains including oats, brown rice, quinoa, buckwheat, freekeh, wholegrain pasta and wholegrain breads
- nuts and seeds
- dairy foods or calcium-enriched plant-based foods
- fruit and vegetables
- healthy fats like extra virgin olive oil, nuts and seeds, or an omega-3 supplement
- vitamin B12-fortified foods if you're excluding dairy and eggs
- flaxseed, chia seeds, walnuts or omega-3 fortified foods (some breads include these).

Pregnancy

Pregnant women following a vegetarian or vegan diet should take a regular B12 supplement as it may not be possible to meet B12 needs with fortified foods alone.

Pregnant and breastfeeding women may also have higher needs for protein, iron, iodine and omega-3 (DHA) and supplements may be necessary.

It is recommended that women seek advice from an APD to help plan their plant-based diet during pregnancy and breastfeeding.

What about children?

Children need enough nutrients to help them grow and develop. Parents and carers of children following a vegetarian diet should take special care to ensure they are getting enough nutrition to thrive.

What about plant-based meat alternatives?

There are many plant-based meat alternatives such as burgers and sausages now available. These alternatives can offer convenience, variety and enjoyment. Many are fortified with vitamins and minerals such as iron, B12 and zinc. They are also high in protein.

Some brands are higher in sodium (salt) and saturated fat than others, so where possible choose healthier options. Look for products with a higher Health Star Rating – the more stars a product has, the healthier it is.

When to see a dietitian



Plant-based diets need to be well planned to meet your nutritional needs. An Accredited Practising Dietitian (APD) can help you meet your individual needs.

We recommend seeing a dietitian if you:

- would like personalised advice and support from a professional
- have specific nutritional needs, such as during pregnancy or for children
- would like advice on whether you need to add supplements to your routine, as well as which ones are best for your individual requirements.

Accredited Practising Dietitians (APDs) are university-trained nutrition experts. They can help you with personalised, easy-to-follow and evidence-based advice.

APDs are Australia's most trusted dietetics professionals.

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Top tips

- Eat a varied and well-balanced diet to meet your nutritional needs.
- Get to know the nutrients you need to focus on when following a vegetarian diet.
- Taking vitamin C with your plant-based source of iron can help to boost absorption. Avoid tea and coffee within one hour of meals for better absorption.
- Supplements may help to ensure you are meeting your nutrient needs.
- Plant-based meat alternatives can sometimes be highly processed and high in salt. Look for products that are fortified, low in saturated fat and low in salt (less than 400mg per 100g).
- If you have specific nutrient needs, like during pregnancy or for children, it can help to talk to a health professional.

This health advice page was peer-reviewed by an Accredited Practising Dietitian (APD) in March 2022.