

Eating a Vegan Diet



A vegan diet is a type of vegetarian diet. It includes only foods that come from plants. It includes fruits, vegetables, beans, grains, seeds, and nuts. Some vegetarians also eat eggs and dairy foods, such as milk and cheese. But a vegan diet includes only plant foods.

Why eat vegan?

Many people choose to be vegans for cultural, social, religious, and even ethical reasons. But a vegan diet is also a healthy way to eat. Vegan diets are high in fiber and can be low in saturated fat. This is to be expected because animal products are a major source of saturated fat. The foods in a vegan diet don't have cholesterol.

Eating a vegan diet can:

- Lower your cholesterol levels
- Lower your blood pressure
- Lower your risk for heart disease
- Help you get and stay at a healthy weight
- Lower your risk for diabetes
- Lower your risk for cancer
- Lower your risk of diverticular disease due to a higher intake of dietary fiber.

Eating a vegan diet may also ease digestive problems, such as:

- Bowel diseases
- Gallstones
- Kidney diseases

Learning to read ingredient labels



To omit animal-based ingredients in a vegan diet, look for labels that say a food is vegan. But this kind of labeling is not on all foods. You will also need to read labels for ingredients. **A vegan diet would not include ingredients from animal sources, such as:**

- Milk
- Cream
- Buttermilk
- Butter
- Ghee
- Whey
- Casein
- Lactose
- Eggs
- Albumin
- Fish sauce
- Rennet
- Cod liver oil
- Honey

These ingredients may be found in many foods, such as:

- Many types of pasta
- Bakery foods that contain milk, butter, or eggs
- Mayonnaise

- Milk chocolate
- Some kinds of caramel
- Custard or pudding made with milk or eggs
- Nougat
- Eggnog
- Some kinds of salad dressings and sauces
- Some packaged foods that are pre-seasoned
- Cheese, yogurt, and ice cream made from animal milk

By reading labels, you can often find vegan choices for many of these foods.

Getting enough nutrients

A vegan diet may be lower in calories, protein, calcium, iron, vitamin B-12, or zinc. However, some components of vegan diets contain certain dietary inhibitors that can interfere with the digestibility and absorption of nutrients, such as calcium, iron, and zinc. They include the polyphenol tannin (found in coffee, tea, and cocoa) and phytates (found in whole grains and legumes). These reduce the amount of iron and zinc absorbed from the diet. Oxalates found in spinach and arugula can interfere with calcium absorption. Therefore, you will need to make food choices carefully to get the nutrients you need and control the portion size. Here are some guidelines for healthy meal planning:

- Eat a wide range of foods. This will help you get more of the nutrients you need.
- Eat a number of plant proteins throughout the day.
- Plan for enough calories each day. Balance the calories you eat with the calories you use each day. Your dietitian or healthcare provider can help you figure out how many calories you need. Also make sure that your calories come from foods that are rich in protein, vitamins, and minerals.

Carbohydrates should make up 45% to 65% of total calories. A good source is fortified whole-grain products. Limit sugar. Added sugars, such as those in sweetened beverages, should provide no more than 10% of your total calories.

Protein should make up 10% to 35% of total calories. Protein rich foods include beans, peas, pulses, lentils, soy products, and unsalted nuts and seeds.

Fat should make up 20% to 35% of total calories. Some sources of plant-based fats are canola, olive, safflower, sunflower, walnut, avocado, and corn oils.

The recommended amount of dietary fiber is 14 g per 1000 calories. A vegan diet should provide plenty of fiber, especially if whole-grain products, such as brown rice and whole-grain bread, are included.

The lists below can help you choose foods that are good sources of nutrients.

Protein

- Dried beans, soybeans, and lentils
- Tofu (bean curd) and tempeh (cultured soybeans)
- Rice, barley, and other whole grains
- Nuts and nut butter
- Nondairy cheese made from soybeans, other legumes, or nuts, pulses

Vitamin B-12

- Fortified soy burgers
- Fortified soy milk or other nondairy milk
- Fortified cereals
- Nutritional yeast

- Seitan (wheat gluten)
- Textured vegetable protein made from soy flour

Zinc

- Canned or dried beans
- Lentils and split peas
- Wheat germ
- Whole-grain breads and cereals
- Nuts and nut butters
- Pumpkin and sunflower seeds

Iron

- Wheat germ
- Dried fruits
- Nuts and seeds
- Whole grain and fortified breads and cereals
- Dried beans, lentils, and split peas
- Dark green leafy vegetables
- Eating plant-based iron-rich foods along with sources of vitamin C like citrus fruits, lemon juice, bell peppers, and tomatoes, appears to increase iron absorption.
- Reduce your consumption of inhibitor-containing foods and beverages, such as tea, coffee, and cocoa when eating iron-rich meals.

Calcium

- Fortified soy milk or other nondairy milk
- Tofu processed with calcium sulfate
- Leafy, dark-green vegetables like kale, broccoli, sprouts, and spinach.
- Dried figs
- Fortified orange juice and fortified cereals
- Sesame seeds
- Beans

Iodine

- Iodized table salt
- Seaweeds
- Cranberries, potatoes, prunes, and navy beans
- Vitamin D: lichen-derived D3 supplements

Taking supplements

Despite eating a lot of nutrient-rich foods, a vegan diet may still be low in these nutrients:

- Vitamin B-12
- Calcium
- Vitamin D
- Omega-3 fatty acids
- Zinc

- Iron

Not having enough of these nutrients may put you at risk for certain health problems. Talk with your dietitian about whether you should take vitamin and mineral supplements.

Getting started

Change to a vegan diet slowly. Here are some tips:

- Start by eating more grains, beans, vegetables, and fruits.
- Make fish, poultry, or meat a side dish. Then slowly cut them out of your diet.
- Eat 3 or more servings of vegetables a day. Include a variety of different colored vegetables.
- Eat 2 or more servings of fruit a day. Choose whole fruits with the skin on.
- Choose a wide range of grains and whole-grain breads and cereals. Eat 6 or more servings of these foods each day.
- Start to replace meat by working up to 2 to 3 servings a day of beans, lentils, split peas, tofu, or tempeh.

Working with a dietitian

A registered dietitian can help you plan a healthy vegan diet. Ask your healthcare provider for a referral to a local dietitian. Or search for a registered dietitian trained in vegetarian eating at the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics (see below).

To learn more

You can learn more about vegan eating and get recipes from these sites:

- [Vegetarian Nutrition Dietetic Practice Group](#)
- [Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics \(AND\)](#)
- [Vegetarian Resource Group](#)
- [American Heart Association](#)

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