

Eating a Vegetarian Diet



A vegetarian diet is based on plant foods. It includes fruits, vegetables, beans, grains, seeds, and nuts. Some vegetarians also eat dairy foods and eggs. There are three common vegetarian diets:

- **Lacto-ovo vegetarians** eat eggs, yogurt, cheese, and other milk products, as well as plant foods.
- **Lacto vegetarians** eat dairy and plant foods but not eggs.
- **Vegans** eat only plant foods.

Why eat a vegetarian diet?

People choose to be vegetarians for health, cultural, social, ethical, and religious reasons. A vegetarian diet is a healthy way to eat. You just have to plan your meals carefully so that you get all the nutrients you need. Most vegetarian diets are high in fiber and low in fat and cholesterol. That means eating vegetarian can:

- Lower your risk of heart disease
- Lower your blood pressure and cholesterol levels
- Help you stay at a healthy weight
- Lower your risk of diabetes
- Lower your risk of cancer
- Decrease digestive problems, including:
 - Bowel diseases
 - Gallstones
 - Colon cancer

Vegetarian basics

A vegetarian diet can be a healthy way to eat for people of all ages. But meals and snacks must be planned to include nonmeat sources of protein, vitamins, and other nutrients. (See the chart below.) Here are some guidelines for healthy meal planning:

- Eat a wide range of foods. This will help you get all the nutrients you need.
- Eat a number of plant proteins throughout the day.
- Plan for enough calories each day. Also make sure that your calories come from foods that are rich in protein, vitamins, and minerals.
- If you eat dairy foods, choose low-fat or fat-free milk, yogurt, or cheese.

Do you need supplements?

A vegetarian diet can easily supply all the calories, protein, vitamins, and minerals that a person needs. But some people have special needs. This may include children and teens, pregnant and lactating women, women past midlife, older adults, and vegans. If you are in one of these groups, you may need extra calories, protein,

calcium, iron, vitamin B-12, vitamin D, or zinc. The lists below can help you choose foods that are good sources of these nutrients. And be sure to ask your healthcare provider about taking vitamin supplements.

Protein

- Dried beans, soybeans, and lentils
- Tofu (bean curd) and tempeh (cultured soybeans)
- Rice, barley, and other whole grains
- Nuts and nut butter
- Milk, yogurt, and cheese
- Eggs
- Casein
- Seitan (also called wheat gluten)

Vitamin B-12

- Milk, yogurt, and cheese
- Eggs
- Fortified soy burgers
- Fortified soy milk or other nondairy milk
- Fortified cereals
- Nutritional yeast

Zinc

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

Calcium

- Milk, yogurt, and cheese
- Fortified soy milk or other nondairy milk
- Tofu processed with calcium sulfate
- Leafy, dark-green vegetables
- Dried figs
- Fortified orange juice and fortified cereals
- Sesame seeds
- Beans

Iron

- Wheat germ
- Dried fruits
- Nuts and seeds
- Whole grain and fortified breads and cereals
- Dried beans, lentils, and split peas
- Leafy, dark-green vegetables
- Eggs

Vitamin D

- Eggs
- Mushrooms treated with ultraviolet light
- Fortified soy milk, cow's milk, orange juice, and ready-to-eat cereals

Getting started

Change to a vegetarian diet slowly. 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. Here are some other tips:

- Eat 3 or more servings of vegetables a day. Eat them raw or lightly steamed.
- 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.
- Begin to replace meat by working up to 2 to 3 servings a day of beans, lentils, split peas, tofu, or tempeh.
- If you eat dairy foods, have 2 to 3 servings a day. Make low-fat or fat-free choices.

For vegans: Add sources of calcium and vitamin B-12, such as fortified nondairy milks and breakfast cereals. Talk with your healthcare provider about vitamin supplements.

To learn more

A registered dietitian (RD) can help you plan a healthy vegetarian diet. For more information and to find an RD who knows about vegetarian diets, search for one through the Vegetarian Nutrition Dietetic Practice Group of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics (AND) at their website, www.vegetariannutrition.net. You can also search AND's website, www.eatright.org. Other groups that can help include:

- Vegetarian Resource Group (www.vrg.org)
- American Cancer Society (www.cancer.org)
- American Heart Association (www.heart.org)

© 2000-2027 The StayWell Company, LLC. All rights reserved. This information is not intended as a substitute for professional medical care. Always follow your healthcare professional's instructions.
This information is not intended as a substitute for professional medical care. Always follow your Healthcare professional's instructions. Copyright Krames LLC.