

## Healthy Vegetarian Eating for Infants, Children and Adolescents

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Most children and adolescents can maintain good health on a balanced vegetarian diet. An individual may choose to be vegetarian for ethical, environmental, or cultural reasons.

### Types of Vegetarians

People may exclude a combination of meat, poultry and fish, eggs or dairy products. Vegans exclude all animal-derived products and obtain their protein from legumes, nuts and soy products. Strict vegan diets are not generally recommended for young children as it can be difficult to ensure adequate nutrition for optimal growth and development.

### Sources of Protein

Meat provides a good source of protein. Alternative sources of protein include:

- Dairy products
- Eggs
- Grains and Legumes
- Soy products (including tofu)
- Nuts and Seeds

### Balanced Vegetarian Diet

Variety is important as with any diet. Ensure protein is included at each meal.

Cereals: All types are suitable.

Dairy Products: Calcium-fortified soy/almond/oat milks, and soy/coconut yoghurt and ice-cream are good alternatives.

Fruits and Vegetables: Aim for a wide variety, although avoid excessive amounts which will prevent adequate intake of other foods.

Fats and Oils: Soy and canola oils include essential fatty acids and provide energy.

## **Adequate Energy from Vegetarian Diet**

Due to the increased proportion of plants foods in a vegetarian diet, more consideration may need to be given to adequate energy intake in comparison to a diet inclusive of animal-derived products. Fat spreads and oils, nut butters, avocado and full fat dairy products are easy and tasty inclusions that can increase the energy value of meals and snacks.

## **Important Nutrients**

Iron: Alternatives to red meat, poultry and fish include legumes, wholegrain breads and cereals, green leafy vegetables, nuts, eggs, dried fruits and iron-fortified breakfast cereals. Including Vitamin C with these foods, such as a glass of orange juice, will increase iron absorption.

Zinc: Plant sources include wholegrain breads and cereal, nuts and legumes.

Vitamin B12: Animal-derived foods are the best source of vitamin B12. Eggs and dairy products are good sources for vegetarians. It is essential for vegans to include B12-fortified foods such as selected soy milks, yeast spreads and soy burgers and sausages.

Calcium: Dairy products are the best sources of calcium, however calcium-fortified soy products are a suitable alternative for those following a vegan diet.

## **Vegetarian Diets at Different Ages**

### Introducing Solids

- Suitable meat alternatives for infants include pureed legumes, nut butters, mashed tofu, eggs, yoghurt and grated cheese.

### Toddlers

- Include protein foods at each meal and limit milk intake to 500ml per day to avoid filling up and missing out on other foods groups.

### Teenagers

- Adolescence may be a time when an individual chooses to follow a vegetarian or vegan diet as they establish their independence. It's important that this is done so responsibly, and adequate alternatives are substituted rather than meat simply being excluded. Dairy products or calcium-fortified soy products can meet the increased needs of calcium at this important time for bone health.

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