

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 3 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 Vegetarian?

People choose to be vegetarians for health, cultural, social, 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 maintain a healthy weight.
- 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 non-meat 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. They may include children and teens, pregnant and lactating women, women past midlife, the elderly, and vegans. If you are in one of these groups, you may need extra calories, protein, calcium, iron, vitamin B12, 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.

<p>Protein</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dried beans, soybeans, and lentils • Tofu (bean curd) and tempeh (cultured soybeans) • Rice, barley, and other grains • Peanuts and peanut butter • Milk, yogurt, and cheese 	<p>Vitamin B12</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Milk, yogurt, and cheese • Eggs • Fortified soy burgers • Fortified soy milk • Fortified cereals
<p>Zinc</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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 	<p>Calcium</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Milk, yogurt, and cheese • Fortified soy milk • Tofu processed with calcium sulfate • Leafy, dark-green vegetables • Dried figs • Fortified orange juice
<p>Iron</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wheat germ • Dried fruits • Prune juice • Nuts and seeds • Whole-grain and enriched breads and cereals • Dried beans, lentils, and split peas 	

- Leafy, dark-green vegetables

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 B12, such as fortified soy milk and breakfast cereals. Talk to your healthcare provider about vitamin supplements.

To Learn More

A registered dietitian (RD) can help you plan a healthy vegetarian diet. To find an RD who knows about vegetarian diets, look in the white pages of your local phone book under your state dietetic association. Or call: American Dietetic Association Hotline at 800-366-1655.

These groups can also help:

Vegetarian Resource Group	American Cancer Society	American Heart Association
410-366-8343	800-422-6237	800-242-8721