



Vegetarian Teens

What is a Vegetarian Diet?

In 2010, it was estimated that approximately 1.4 million youth in the United States eat a vegetarian diet.¹ A vegetarian diet is composed of mostly plant foods (grains, legumes, nuts, seeds, vegetables and fruit) while limiting or eliminating animal products. Animal products include: flesh foods (beef, pork, poultry and fowl, wild game and fish), dairy (milk, yogurt, and cheeses), eggs, and processed foods containing casein or whey.

There are various forms of vegetarian diets. A teen may choose a semi-vegetarian diet, which is comprised of mostly plant foods with the occasional beef, pork, poultry, or fish once or twice weekly. Others may choose to follow a vegan diet, in which all flesh foods, eggs, dairy products and sometimes honey are eliminated from the diet. A list of the most common types of vegetarian diets is located on page VT-2, [The Spectrum of Vegetarian Diets](#).

While some vegetarian diets present a risk for nutrient deficiencies, a plant-based eating pattern is known to have numerous health benefits. Individuals who follow a healthy vegetarian diet have a lower risk of developing heart disease, diabetes, obesity and high blood pressure as well as colorectal, ovarian and breast cancers.²

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The Spectrum of Vegetarian Diets

Vegetarian diet: Devoid of all flesh foods, but may include egg or dairy products.

Ovo-vegetarian: Includes eggs, but excludes meat and dairy.

Lacto-ovo-vegetarian: Includes eggs and dairy, but excludes fish and meat.

Vegan: A strict vegetarian diet that excludes meat, fish, eggs, and dairy. (Sometimes excludes honey and all food products that come from animals)

Raw vegan: Very strict diet including only fresh and uncooked fruit, nuts, seeds, and vegetables.

Macrobiotic: A strict whole-foods, plant based diet that includes fish but no other flesh foods and includes mostly brown rice and whole grains supplemented with local vegetables, seaweed, beans, nuts, seeds, certain fruits, and miso soup.

Semi-vegetarian: A plant-based dietary pattern that includes beef, pork, poultry, or fish on occasion (once or twice weekly).

Eating a wide variety of healthy foods is the key to planning a vegetarian diet. A healthy vegetarian eating plan includes: fruits, vegetables, leafy greens, whole grains, legumes, nuts, seeds, dairy product alternatives and for some, dairy and eggs. Vitamin and mineral supplements may be recommended if a specific vegetarian diet is not providing adequate amounts of essential nutrients.

It is important to note that even though a plant-based eating pattern has many health benefits, not all vegetarian diets are healthy. Vegetarians need to be aware of the specific essential nutrients that may be missing from their diet because of the foods they avoid. To see what specific nutrients are of concern for common types of vegetarian diets, use the [Nutrients of Concern](#) handout.

It is possible to eat fries, chips, sweets and soda and technically be a “vegetarian.” However, these foods do not support or promote health.

With proper education and planning, vegetarian diets can provide all of the essential nutrients that constitute a healthy, well-balanced diet.

Why Teens Choose to Go Vegetarian

Adolescents may choose to eat a vegetarian diet for various reasons including the following:

- Interest in animal rights
- Religious beliefs
- Health or wellness
- To lose or maintain weight
- Fitness (dance, sports)
- Popular among friends

Health care professionals should be aware of the possible use of vegetarian eating patterns as a method to restrict food consumption. Vegetarian dieting among adolescents may potentially lead to disordered eating.³⁻⁴ To learn more about disordered eating see the [Body Image and Disordered Eating](#) section.

What Are the Nutrition Concerns for Vegetarian Adolescents?

Vegan Diets

Adolescents who practice a vegan diet may have a greater risk for deficiencies of nutrients, particularly n-3 fatty acids, calcium, vitamin D, iron, zinc, vitamin B₁₂. Referral to a registered dietitian (also known as registered dietitian nutritionist) is recommended.

Protein

Concerns about protein deficiencies arise when meat, poultry, seafood, eggs, or dairy products are eliminated in the diet. With careful planning, the protein needs of vegetarian teens can be met with consumption of a variety of plant foods. Legumes, nuts, seeds, and some grains (like quinoa) contain good amounts of protein. Some vegetables contain a *small* amount of protein like, broccoli, spinach, artichokes and potatoes. Use the [Vegan Foods with Protein](#) handout to recommend protein rich foods for vegetarians.



Even though plant foods can provide protein, there is still a concern with only getting protein from plant sources because the amino acid composition of plant protein is very different from that of animal protein. Amino acids are the building blocks of protein. Our bodies need amino acids in order to grow and function properly. Two categories of amino acids are *essential* and *nonessential*. Essential amino acids cannot be synthesized in the body and must be provided through diet. Animal sources of protein like meat, poultry, seafood, eggs, and dairy, are called *complete* protein sources because they contain adequate amounts of all of the essential amino acids. Most plant proteins do not contain all of the essential amino acids and are known as *incomplete* proteins.

It is possible to get adequate amounts of all of the essential amino acids by combining two or more plant proteins. This combination of plant foods is known as a *complementary* protein. The most common complementary protein pairs are grains and beans or legumes. Classic examples of complementary meals include: rice and beans, rice and lentils, tortillas and beans, black-eyed peas and cornbread, bean or pea soup with whole grain bread, and peanut butter sandwiches.

A vegetarian diet may not provide sufficient amounts of amino acids, and thus protein, when only a single plant protein is consumed in a day. Therefore, adolescents following a vegetarian diet should consume a variety of plant protein foods every day. Non-meat sources of complete protein include: eggs, milk, cheese, yogurt, and soy products. For vegan sources of protein see the [Vegan Foods with Protein](#) handout.

CAUTION!

In general, almond and rice milk are **NOT** good sources of protein.

Almond and rice milk contain approximately 1g of protein in a 1 cup serving while cow's and soy milk contains 8-9g of protein.

n-3 Fatty Acids

Emerging and ongoing research suggests potential health benefits of specific fatty acids.⁵ Because the human body cannot make n-3 fatty acids, it is essential to obtain them through the diet. The best sources of n-3 fatty acids are specific fish: salmon, sardines, tuna, herring and trout. Vegetarian adolescents who do not eat fish should be sure to include flaxseeds, chia seeds, walnuts, and canola or soybean oil in their diet.⁵

Calcium and Vitamin D

Calcium and vitamin D are also nutrients of concern in a vegetarian diet. Vegetarians who avoid milk and other dairy products should supplement their diet with a calcium and vitamin D -fortified milk alternative, such as soy milk.

Some good nondairy sources of calcium include: tofu processed with calcium, unsweetened calcium-fortified soy beverages, broccoli, sunflower seeds, nuts, legumes, calcium fortified orange juice, and fortified breakfast cereal. See [Calcium](#) guideline for more information on dairy and nondairy sources of calcium.

To get the recommended amount of vitamin D, vegetarians who do not consume any eggs or dairy products should eat foods that are fortified with vitamin D such as breakfast cereals, juices, and unsweetened soy beverages. A supplement can also help achieve the Dietary Reference Intake of vitamin D for adolescents, which is 600 International Units per day.⁶

Iron

Iron intake can be a concern for all teens. Adolescents that follow a vegetarian diet should be encouraged to include iron-rich foods at every meal (see [Iron](#) section for more information).

Iron from plant foods, even when fortified, is not absorbed as well as iron from animal sources. However, there are ways to improve the absorption of iron in plant and fortified foods (such as legumes, whole-wheat bread, tofu, and spinach). One way is to include vitamin C foods (citrus fruits or juices, broccoli, tomatoes) at meals that include plant sources of iron. Semi-vegetarians who eat small amounts of meat, poultry, or fish are getting a great source of iron

that the body can readily use. The iron in meat and fish also helps absorb the iron from plant and fortified sources.^{7, 8}

Zinc

More than two-thirds of the zinc in the American diet comes from animal sources.⁷ Vegetarians who include milk, cheese, yogurt, or eggs in their diet can get enough zinc. Vegans can get enough zinc by eating legumes, soy products, tofu, seeds, nuts, and whole grains. The zinc is in the germ and bran of whole grains.

Plant sources of zinc contain phytates and fiber that make it difficult for the body to absorb the zinc contained in them. A multivitamin supplement is an option for vegans and other strict vegetarians to get adequate zinc in the diet. Such supplements should contain 100% or less of the Recommended Dietary Allowance (RDA) of zinc. (See table below)

Age	Females	Males
9-13	8	8
14-18	9	11
19-30	8	11
Pregnancy		
14-18	12	
19-30	11	
Lactation		
14-18	13	
19-30	12	

Source: Institute of Medicine, Food and Nutrition Board⁹

Vitamin B₁₂

Vegetarian teens that omit all animal products (especially vegans and raw vegans) are at a high risk of a vitamin B₁₂ deficiency.^{2, 10-12} Vitamin B₁₂ is only found naturally in animal products. Unfortified plant foods do not contain significant amounts of active vitamin B₁₂. Deficiency of this vitamin can cause neurological problems that may be irreversible, especially in infants or young children.

Vegetarian adolescents who eliminate all animal products should include food products fortified with vitamin B₁₂ and consider taking a vitamin

B₁₂ supplement or multivitamin that contains vitamin B₁₂.

Vegans should look for cereals, soymilk, or other soy products like vegetarian burger patties that are fortified with B₁₂. Seaweed, algae, spirulina, and fermented plant foods such as tempeh and miso are not good sources of B₁₂ because it is in a form that cannot be used by the human body.¹⁰

Diet	Nutrients	Sources
Ovo-vegetarian	Calcium	Spinach, kale, turnips, collard greens, broccoli, soybeans
	Vitamin D	Vitamin D fortified cereals, juices, soymilk or vitamin D supplement recommended
Lacto-ovo vegetarian	As long as a wide variety of foods are eaten every day, this diet provides adequate amounts of essential nutrients. *Vitamin B ₁₂ supplementation	
Vegan or Raw vegan	Protein	See Vegan Foods with Protein
	n-3 Fatty Acids	Flaxseeds, chia seeds, walnuts, canola oil
	Iron	Soybeans, lentils, spinach, tofu
	Zinc	Beans, nuts, whole grains
	Calcium	Spinach, kale, turnips, collard greens, broccoli, soybeans
	Vitamin D	Vitamin D fortified cereals, juices, soymilk or vitamin D supplement recommended
Macrobiotic	Vitamin B ₁₂	Vitamin B ₁₂ supplement or Vegan multivitamin
	As long as a wide variety of foods are eaten every day, this diet provides adequate amounts of essential nutrients. *Vitamin B ₁₂ supplementation	

Pregnancy

The nutrient and energy needs of pregnant and lactating vegetarian women do not differ from those of non-vegetarian women with the exception of higher iron recommendations for vegetarians.²

Additional Screening

Use the [Food Habits](#) screening tool from the [Nutrition and Physical Activity Screen](#) section located on page NS-7 for an initial screening of dietary habits. If the teen follows a vegetarian diet, use the following questions to determine the specific type of diet followed.

Do you ever eat any flesh foods (beef, pork, poultry, or fish)?

Do you drink milk? If yes, what kind (cow, soy, almond, rice)?

Note: almond and rice milk are inadequate sources of protein.

Do you eat cheese?

Do you eat yogurt?

Do you eat eggs?

Do you eat cooked foods?

If the teen answered “no” to any of these questions, refer to the [Smart Choices](#) handout for suggestions on how to improve the teen’s diet.

Use the [Vegetarian Food Guide](#) to educate the teen on how to incorporate all of the food groups into the diet to ensure a healthy eating pattern.

Use [Smart Choices](#) activity sheet with clients to guide them on how to replace nutrients in their diet that may be missing due to food group elimination.

- ❖ Adolescents who do not substitute alternative nutrient rich foods for the foods they eliminate are at risk for nutrient deficiencies.
- ❖ If you suspect that the client’s diet is inadequate, refer them to a registered dietitian (registered dietitian nutritionist).
- ❖ Refer adolescents who follow a vegan diet to a registered dietitian to assess the adequacy of their diet.
- ❖ Pregnant adolescents who are vegetarian or vegan are at a high risk for nutrient deficiencies. Refer to a registered dietitian.

Follow-Up

Review the completed [Smart Choices](#) activity sheet with the client. Ask her to fill out a new sheet and indicate the changes she has made since the nutrition intervention.

If the teen did not make any changes, explore what barriers prevented her from doing so. Validate her feelings. Discuss possible strategies for removing these barriers.

If the teen made changes but still falls short of the recommended intake, praise her for the changes that she did make. Work with her to revise her action plan to change or add goals for behavior change.

If the teen has made changes and achieved the recommended intake, praise her and consider if she needs to develop a new action plan in order to maintain the new behavior.

Interventions/Referrals

Use the screening questions to identify what food groups and nutrients need the most attention.

Use [Vegetarian Food Guide](#) activity sheet to educate the client on healthy eating pattern for a vegetarian diet.

Use the [Tips for Vegetarians](#) activity sheet to give the clients suggestions for how to have a healthy vegetarian diet.

Web Links Referenced/Additional Resources

Title	Resource Type	URL
USDA: My Plate	Webpage	http://choosemyplate.gov/healthy-eating-tips/tips-for-vegetarian.html
USDA: Vegetarian Nutrition	Webpage	https://fnic.nal.usda.gov/lifecycle-nutrition/vegetarian-nutrition
The Vegetarian Resource Group	Webpage	http://www.vrg.org/
Vegetarian Nutrition	Website	http://vegetariannutrition.net/
Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine	Website	http://www.pcrm.org/
People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA)	Website	http://www.peta.org/
Vegan Health	Website	http://www.veganhealth.org/
VegWeb	Website	http://www.vegweb.com/
Vegetarian-Nutrition.info	Website-resources	http://www.vegetarian-nutrition.info/
Vegetarian Nutrition dietetic practice group	Website - resources	http://vndpg.org/
Medline Plus: Vegetarian Diet	Webpage	http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/vegetariandiet.html
USDA: My Plate Super Tracker	Webpage-interactive tool	http://choosemyplate.gov/supertracker-tools.html
CDC: Nutrition for Everyone: Protein	Webpage	http://www.cdc.gov/nutrition/everyone/basics/protein.html

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Vegetarian Food Guide

Find out what you need by filling out a Daily Food Plan online at www.choosemyplate.gov/myplate/index.aspx.

If you are pregnant or breastfeeding, use this Daily Food Plan at www.choosemyplate.gov/tools.html.

Food Groups	Quantity Needed/Day	Examples	Nutrition Tip
Protein Foods	_____ ounces	1 ounce= <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ¼ cup dried beans, peas, or lentils • ½ cup bean, pea, or lentil soup • 1 tablespoon peanut butter • ½ ounce nuts/seeds • ½ soy patty • ¼ cup tofu or tempeh • 1 egg, 2 egg whites, or ¼ cup egg substitute 	Select tofu set with calcium sulfate for a calcium bonus: 1/2-cup can have as much calcium as 1 cup of milk
Dairy	_____ cups	1 cup= <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1 cup milk or yogurt • 1 cup unsweetened calcium and vitamin D-fortified soy milk or soy yogurt • 1 ½ ounces natural cheese or 2 ounces processed cheese 	Protect your bones: Calcium-fortified juices, cereals, tofu with calcium sulfate, and calcium-rich plant foods like collard greens can also help meet calcium needs.
Grains	_____ ounces	1 ounce= <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1 slice whole grain bread • 1/2 cup cooked pasta or rice • 1 cup of ready-to-eat cereal • 1 small (6") tortilla 	Make half your grains whole! Whole grains provide fiber, vitamins, minerals, and protein.
Vegetables	_____ cups	1 cup= <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1 cup of raw or cooked vegetables • 2 cups of raw leafy greens such as lettuce • 1 cup vegetable juice 	Eat plenty of nutrient-rich, dark green, deep red, and yellow-orange vegetables. Vegetables provide fiber, vitamins, and minerals.
Fruits	_____ cups	1 cup= <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1 cup of sliced fresh or canned fruit • medium-sized or large piece of fruit • 1 cup 100% juice (diluted) • 1/2 cup dried fruit 	Vitamin C-rich foods like strawberries and a ½ cup of orange juice boost iron absorption from legumes and iron-fortified cereals.
Fats/Oils	_____ teaspoons	1 teaspoon= <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1 teaspoon olive oil, vegetable oil, margarine, or butter • 1 teaspoon of mayonnaise-type salad dressing *avocado is considered a fruit ½ avocado ≈ 3 teaspoons of fat	Eat oils in moderation. When you purchase foods, look for choices that have no trans fats or are reduced in fat.

Tips for Vegetarians

Get enough protein

- ◆ Soy milk can be a good substitute for cow's milk, but be sure to check the Nutrition Facts on the food label - some brands are fortified with calcium, but not all are. Some have large amounts of sugar, so look for unsweetened soy drinks.
- ◆ Experiment with soybean products such as tofu, tempeh, textured soy protein, and soy milk in your meal planning.
- ◆ Eat beans, such as black, pinto, and garbanzo beans every day.
- ◆ Eat unsalted nuts and seeds.
- ◆ Choose nonfat or low-fat milk, yogurts and cheeses.
- ◆ Eat tofu or soybean products.
- ◆ Most grains have some protein. Try some quinoa.

Eat your grains

- ◆ Choose whole grain more than half the time.
- ◆ For variety, try different types of breads, such as bagels, tortillas, pita bread, chapatis, focaccia, and naan.
- ◆ Choose fortified breakfast cereals for added nutrients such as iron, folic acid, Vitamin B₁₂, and zinc.

Vary your veggies

- ◆ Eat plenty of colorful veggies each day.
- ◆ Pick meals and snacks with several different vegetables.
- ◆ Choose vegetables that are good sources of calcium: dark green leafy veggies (kale, mustard, collard, or turnip greens), bok choy, and broccoli. These foods also supply iron.
- ◆ Choose vegetables that are high in Vitamin C, for example, broccoli, tomatoes, and green pepper. Vitamin C helps you absorb the iron in vegetables and eggs.



Focus on fruits

- ◆ Include plenty of whole fruit each day.
- ◆ Fruits high in Vitamin C include citrus fruits, melons, and berries.
- ◆ Eat fruit for dessert and snacks.
- ◆ When you drink juice, choose 100% fruit juice and dilute it with water. Try calcium-fortified juices, especially if you do not drink milk.

Smart Choices

Identify the foods you don't eat in the "If I don't eat this..." column and circle the foods you can use to replace them from the "I can choose this..." column. Use this handout as an action plan for change.

If I don't eat this...	I can choose this...	
<p>Meat</p> <p>Fish</p> <p>Chicken</p>	<p>Milk</p> <p>Dairy foods</p> <p>Eggs</p> <p>Eggs substitutes</p> <p>Beans</p> <p>Lentils</p> <p>Peas</p>	<p>Nuts and seeds including peanut butter</p> <p>Fortified, unsweetened soy beverages</p> <p>Soy meat alternatives (veggie burgers)</p> <p>Whole and fortified grains</p>
<p>Milk</p> <p>Cheese</p> <p>Yogurt</p>	<p>Fortified unsweetened soy beverages</p> <p>Calcium fortified juices</p> <p>Kale</p> <p>Broccoli</p> <p>Bok choy</p> <p>Tofu with calcium</p> <p>Oatmeal</p>	<p>Calcium fortified cereal</p> <p>Eggs or egg substitutes</p> <p>Fish</p> <p>Meat</p> <p>Chicken</p> <p>Almonds</p> <p>Sesame seeds</p>

Vegan Foods with Protein

Food	Amount	Protein (g)	
Lentils, cooked	1 cup	18	
Black beans, cooked	1 cup	15	
Kidney beans, cooked	1 cup	15	
Chickpeas, cooked	1 cup	15	
Pinto beans, cooked	1 cup	15	
Tofu, firm	1 cup	11	
Tofu, regular	1 cup	10	
Tempeh	1 cup	31	
Bagel	1 medium (3.5 oz)	10	
Quinoa, cooked	1 cup	8	
Wild Rice, cooked	1 cup	7	
Peas, cooked	1 cup	8	
Peanut Butter	2 Tbsp	8	
Almond Butter	2 Tbsp	7	
Whole wheat spaghetti, cooked	1 cup	5	
Almonds	¼ cup	8	
Soy milk, commercial, plain	1 cup	7	
Whole wheat bread	2 slices	7	
Soy yogurt, plain	8 ounces	6	
Sunflower seeds	¼ cup	6	
Spinach, cooked	1 cups	3	
Broccoli, cooked	1 cup	4	
Artichoke hearts, cooked	1 cup	5	
Potato, baked	1 small potato	3	

Source: United States Department of Agriculture, Agricultural Research Service. National Nutrient Database for Standard Reference Release 27. Available at <http://ndb.nal.usda.gov/>. Accessed June 2015.