

VEGETARIANS

Vegetarians choose to avoid animal products in their diets, often because of concern for animals. There are several types of vegetarians:

- semi-vegetarians – eat chicken and fish
- lacto-ovo-vegetarians – avoid meat, poultry, and fish but eat eggs and dairy products (milk, yogurt, cheese)
- total vegetarian (vegan)– avoid all animal products and animal by-products such as honey

As with any diet, a good variety of foods is important for good nutrition. Anyone who chooses to avoid animal products must be willing to commit to compensating with alternative nutrient sources.

Nutritional risk increases with the degree of dietary restriction. Iron deficiency is more likely in vegetarians. Plant sources of iron include dried beans, peas, nuts, seeds, whole grains, lentils, and dark green leafy vegetables. Fortified foods (containing added iron) include pasta, bread, rice and many breakfast cereals. The absorption of iron is enhanced by combining iron-rich foods with vitamin C (orange juice, tomatoes, broccoli, strawberries). See our handout about iron.

Zinc is another nutrient of concern for vegetarians. Zinc can be found in many of the same foods as iron: nuts, peas, dried beans, whole grains, and fortified cereals.

For strict vegetarians, calcium deficiency may be a problem, especially in childhood and adolescence. Soy products such as soymilk, soy cheese, or tofu are not naturally calcium-rich but are available in fortified versions. Cooked broccoli, collards, turnips, and kale contain about 150 mg per cup. Calcium fortified products such as orange juice (300 mg per cup) or breakfast cereals are useful. Calcium supplements are an option as well. The minimum allowance for calcium before puberty is 700-1000 mg per day. During and after puberty 1300 mg per day are required. See our Calcium handout.

Animal products are the only natural source of vitamin B-12. Choosing products fortified with B-12 is essential.

Soy products, legumes (dried beans, peas, and lentils), seeds, and nuts will provide adequate protein if at least two servings per day are eaten. Small amounts of protein are also found in grains, fruits, and vegetables.

Vegetarianism is a safe alternative dietary style when the diet is varied and specific nutritional issues like those above are addressed properly. A good vitamin and mineral supplement may add extra insurance.

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