



ASK THE DIETITIAN

Vegetarian Choices

Q. I recently became a vegetarian and my family members say that I won't be able to get enough protein if I don't eat meat, is this true?

A. Protein deficiency is rare in the U.S. In fact, most Americans eat too much protein which leads to extra calories, and eventually extra pounds. As a vegetarian you can get protein from a variety of sources other than meat. Dairy, eggs, beans, nuts, and soy products are all good sources of protein. Grains and vegetables also provide some protein in the diet. If you are eating enough calories from a wide variety of plant based foods you should have no problem getting enough protein. Visit <http://www.choosemyplate.gov/foodgroups/vegetarian.html> for tips on making nutritious vegetarian choices.

Q. I have been hearing a lot about vegetarian diets lately, but are they really healthy?

A. A properly planned vegetarian diet is very healthy. In fact, the American Cancer Society and the American Heart Association recommend eating plant-based foods to help reduce the risk of chronic diseases. Research shows that there is a wide range of health benefits associated with vegetarian choices. Vegetarians are at lower risk for obesity, hypertension, heart disease, high cholesterol, type II diabetes, prostate and colon cancers. Vegetarian foods are rich in health promoting nutrients such as fiber, magnesium, potassium, folate, antioxidants, and phytochemicals, making them a healthy addition to your lifestyle.

Q. I am a strict vegetarian, how do I get enough omega-3 fatty acids?

A. Essential fatty acids are important for heart health and need to be included in the diet because the body cannot make them. The most common source of omega-3 fatty acid's (fish) is not included in vegetarian or vegan diets. Vegetable sources of omega-3 fatty acids include flaxseed oil, ground flaxseed, walnuts, and tofu. Including these items into daily meals will help meet your needs.

Q. I am a physically active person; won't I be tired all the time if I am just eating fruits and vegetables?

A. Vegetarian choices include much more than fruits and vegetables. Vegetarian choices should not leave you tired and can provide you with enough energy to lead a physically active lifestyle. In addition to fruits and vegetables you should be eating a variety of whole grains, low-fat dairy, beans, nuts, and seeds. Eating healthy meals and drinking plenty of water will also help you feel energized. If you are feeling tired all the time it may be due to not eating enough total calories, not getting enough sleep, excessive exercise, not eating a properly balanced diet, or illness. Talk to your doctor or a Registered Dietitian to make sure you are eating a balanced diet and getting all the nutrients you need.

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Q. I am interested in becoming vegetarian, what are some important things I need to know?

A. People choose to be vegetarian for a variety of reasons, depending on your reason you may choose to restrict only meat, poultry, and fish, or even dairy and eggs as well. Whatever you decide, make sure that you eat a variety of foods so that you get enough of the nutrients associated with meat fish and dairy such as protein, iron, calcium, vitamin B12 and Omega-3's. If you're already eating a wide variety of plant based foods such as whole grains, beans, legumes, fruits and vegetables, getting enough essential nutrients should be easy. While teaming up with another vegetarian to share ideas and recipes can be helpful, consult your doctor and a registered dietitian to discuss types and amounts of vegetarian foods that are right for you. Remember, being a vegetarian is about making choices that fit your lifestyle and beliefs.

Q. I am a vegetarian mother, is breastfeeding safe for my baby?

A. Vegetarian mothers should be encouraged to breastfeed. Breast milk between vegetarian and non-vegetarian women is very similar and both contain similar nutrients. If you do not eat dairy, eggs, or other fortified sources of vitamin B₁₂ you may need supplements while breastfeeding. Talk to your doctor and a registered dietitian to get advice about the diet and exercise plan that's right for you

Q. I heard that vegetarians are at higher risk for osteoporosis because they don't get enough calcium, is this true?

A. Calcium is needed for strong bones but vegetarians are at no higher risk for osteoporosis than non-vegetarians. Some studies show that vegetarians are at less risk for osteoporosis because they do not eat excessive protein which may lead to calcium loss from bones. There are many sources of calcium that allow vegetarians to get the recommended 1,000 mg per day. Dairy products are excellent sources of calcium. Some good non-dairy sources of calcium include tofu made with calcium sulfate, broccoli, collard greens, almonds, soybeans, fortified soymilk, and fortified orange juice.

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Q. I am thinking about becoming pregnant, is it safe even if I am a vegetarian?

A. Well-planned vegetarian diets can provide all the nutrients you need during pregnancy. Studies show that vegetarian women give birth to babies with normal weights. Pregnant women should eat a wide variety of plant-based foods including vegetables, fruits, whole grains, beans, and nuts. Iron, folate, vitamin D, and omega-3 fatty acids need to be considered more closely during pregnancy. Good sources of these nutrients are leafy greens, whole grains, beans, fortified cereals and milk, dried fruits, soy products, walnuts, and flaxseed. It is also important for expectant mothers to get adequate sunlight or a vitamin D supplement may be necessary. Nutritious snacks throughout the day can help meet your energy, vitamin, and mineral needs. Be sure to see your doctor regularly to make sure you are getting the nutrients you need for a healthy pregnancy.

Q. If I were to become vegetarian, what foods would I include in my daily meals?

A. According to the American Dietetic Association a well-balanced diet for vegetarians includes;

<u>Food Group</u>	<u>Daily Servings</u>
Grains	6
Legumes/nuts/seeds	5
Vegetables	4
Fruits	2
Fats	2

You should also include foods that are high in calcium such as dairy products, or broccoli, kale, almonds, and fortified orange juice. A sample vegetarian daily meal plan may include the following:

- Breakfast: Oatmeal made with milk or soymilk and sprinkled with flaxseed
A glass of fortified orange juice
- Lunch: Spinach salad with veggies and chickpeas tossed in olive oil
Whole grain roll
Low-fat yogurt or soy yogurt topped with blueberries
- Dinner: Vegetarian stir-fry made with tofu, a variety of vegetables, and whole grain rice
- Snacks: Whole grain crackers or pita with hummus
Mixed nuts or trail mix
Apples or celery with peanut butter

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Q. I am thinking about becoming vegetarian but I am afraid I will not find foods that I like; what can I still eat?

A. Many everyday foods are vegetarian such as cereal, oatmeal, grilled cheese, yogurt, peanut butter and jelly, and plain pizza. In fact, most of the foods we eat that are the staples of a well-balanced diet such as vegetables, fruits, low-fat dairy, whole grains, beans and nuts are vegetarian. It is easy to turn your favorite entrees vegetarian by substituting vegetables, beans, or tofu for the meat. Try different vegetarian recipes and you should find many that you enjoy.

Q. I heard that tofu can be a good addition to a vegetarian diet, what is it and how do I use it?

A. Tofu is soymilk that has been coagulated, pressed, and cut into blocks. Tofu is a great addition to a vegetarian diet because it is low in calories and high in magnesium, iron, and calcium (if calcium sulfate was used in processing). Tofu itself does not have much flavor but it acts like a sponge and soaks up the flavor of the foods it is being cooked with. Tofu can be used in chili, stir-fry, soup, or made into burgers. Tofu can even be used as the filling for pies and desserts. A vegetarian cookbook will provide you with many recipes and different ways to use tofu.

Q. I am a competitive athlete; can a vegetarian diet be good for me?

A. Vegetarian diets can be healthy and safe for athletes. There are many famous athletes who are vegetarian such as Joe Namath, Hank Aaron, and Serena Williams. If you get enough calories daily from a wide variety of vegetables, fruits, whole grains, low-fat dairy, beans, and nuts you can get all the nutrients needed for athletic performance. Many small meals throughout the day as well as snacks that combine carbohydrates and protein will keep your energy levels high. Whole grain bagels or bananas with peanut butter, egg whites on toast, and yogurt smoothies are all good snacks for an energy boost.

Q. I recently became a vegetarian, are there any vitamins and minerals that I may not be getting enough of?

A. While vegetarian choices are beneficial to your health, proper planning is necessary to meet vitamin and mineral requirements. Since you eat mainly plant-based foods, closer attention must be given to specific nutrients that usually come from meat or dairy such as protein, iron, zinc, calcium, vitamin D and vitamin B₁₂. Eating a variety of plant-based foods such as whole grains, nuts, beans, green leafy vegetables, dried fruits as well as fortified products like cereal, orange juice, and soymilk will help you meet your needs.

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Q. I don't have a lot of extra money, how will I afford to buy vegetarian foods?

A. Vegetarian foods do not have to cost any more than non-vegetarian foods. Substitute products such as veggie and bean burgers, textured vegetable protein, and soy are comparable in price to meat. You can cut costs by shopping at a farmer's market for fresh seasonal fruits and vegetables, cooking from scratch instead of buying pre-made vegetarian meals, and by substituting vegetables and beans for meat. Some inexpensive vegetarian meal ideas include vegetable omelets with low-fat cheese, roasted or raw vegetables on a whole wheat pita with hummus, vegetarian chili, and vegetable stir-fry with whole grain rice.

Q. My child is interested in becoming vegetarian, is this safe?

A. Vegetarian diets can be healthy and safe for all ages. Studies of children who grow up in vegetarian communities show they are leaner and grow to the same heights as non-vegetarian children. Research also shows that vegetarian children are at less risk for obesity and have lower cholesterol levels. To keep up with your child's rapid growth you must make sure they are getting enough calories and important nutrients. This can be accomplished by eating a wide variety of plant-based food such as vegetables, fruits, whole grains, beans and nuts. Milk, cheese, and yogurt will provide calcium and protein required for bone health and proper growth. Remember that variety and balance is extremely important to raising your healthy vegetarian child.

Q. I am trying to manage my weight; will a vegetarian diet help me do this?

A. As with any diet it all comes down to calories in, calories out. To maintain your weight, you need to burn as many calories as you eat. To lose weight, you must burn more calories than you take in. A vegetarian diet can be a healthy way to help manage your weight because many vegetarian foods are lower in calories and saturated fats. However, not all vegetarian foods are low in calories which is why you still need to keep track. Eating a variety of vegetables, fruits, whole grains, and legumes, limiting sweetened and high fat foods, choosing low-fat dairy products, and participating in at least 30 minutes of moderate exercise on most days of the week will help you accomplish your weight goals.

Q. I have been trying to include more vegetarian choices into my meals, but I never know if a packaged food is truly vegetarian, is there a way to tell?

A. To decide if a packaged food is truly vegetarian you must read the ingredient list on the food label. Some vegetarian or vegan products are identified by their labels; however some items that are not labeled may still be vegetarian. Also, many products appear to be vegetarian, but actually are not if they contain any of the following; anchovies, animal fats, meat stocks and gelatin which is made from collagen, an animal product.

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Q. I do not eat any kind of meat and consider myself vegetarian, but my friends say that I'm not since I still eat dairy and eggs, who is right?

A. There are many different types of vegetarians. Since you do not eat meat, poultry, or fish, but include dairy and eggs, you would be called a lacto-ovo vegetarian. Your friends may be thinking of the term vegan, which is a vegetarian who restricts all animal products including dairy, eggs, and even honey. There are even terms such as semi-vegetarian and flexitarian to describe people who are vegetarian on most days, but may eat meat, poultry, or fish occasionally. Share with your friends that when it comes to being a vegetarian, there is no one right way.

Q. I really enjoy going out to eat; will I be limited to only side dishes to choose from?

A. Most restaurants now offer vegetarian choices due to the increased demand for these items. Salad bars, pasta dishes topped with vegetables, eggplant parmesan, vegetable casseroles, and veggie or black bean burgers are good vegetarian options when eating out. Many ethnic cuisines such as Indian and Mediterranean include many vegetarian dishes as well. If there aren't many vegetarian options on the menu, you can always ask the chef to create a simple vegetarian dish.

Q. I've heard some controversy over soy products; should I stop using them?

A. Soy in moderation is healthy and safe and you can continue to enjoy these products. Although there has been some controversy over the link between too much soy and increased risk of breast cancer, research remains inconclusive. However, it has been shown that 2-3 servings of soy per day are safe for most healthy people and may provide health benefits such as reduced risk for osteoporosis and certain cancers. The FDA states that 25 grams of soy per day as part of a diet low in saturated fat and cholesterol may reduce the risk of heart disease.

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