

Vegetarian diets

People follow vegetarian diets for a variety of reasons – whatever your reason, plan your diet to ensure you're getting all the required nutrients.

Types of vegetarian diets

Vegetarians typically don't eat meat, poultry, fish or shellfish. However different types of vegetarian diets exist:

- **Lacto-ovo vegetarians** – eat dairy foods and eggs but not meat, poultry or seafood
- **Ovo-vegetarians** – include eggs but avoid all other animal foods, including dairy
- **Lacto-vegetarians** – eat dairy foods but exclude eggs, meat, poultry and seafood
- **Vegans** – don't eat any animal products at all, including honey.

Variations include:

- **Pescetarians** – eat fish and/or shellfish
- **Semi-vegetarians (or flexitarians)** – occasionally eat meat or poultry.

Eating for optimum health

The government's eatwell plate still applies to vegetarians. This includes eating plenty of fruit, vegetables and starchy foods such as bread, cereals and potatoes; moderate amounts of meat/fish-alternatives; some dairy foods or alternatives; and a small amount of food high in fat and/or sugar.

Well planned vegetarian diets can be nutritious and healthy. They are associated with lower risks of heart disease, high blood pressure, Type 2 diabetes, obesity, certain cancers and lower cholesterol levels. This could be because such diets are lower in

saturated fat, contain fewer calories and more fibre and phytonutrients/phytochemicals (these can have protective properties) than non-vegetarian diets.

However, there are some specific nutrients you need to consider:

Protein

Vegetarian sources of protein include:

- beans, lentils and chickpeas
- soya and soya products e.g. soya dairy alternatives, tofu, soya nuts and soya mince
- seeds
- nuts and nut butters (e.g. peanut butter)
- grains such as wheat (found in cereals, pasta and bread), rice and maize.

If you eat them:

- eggs
- milk and dairy products (yoghurts and cheese)
- mycoprotein a high-protein vegetarian meat alternative (has added egg).

Protein is made up of building blocks called amino acids. Some amino acids are essential as the body can't make them itself. Animal proteins contain the complete mix of essential amino acids. Soya, quinoa and hemp are plant foods containing all the essential amino acids.

Most other plant proteins provide some, with each plant providing a different combination. So, as long as you're eating a mixture of different plant proteins you'll be getting all the essential amino acids your body needs.

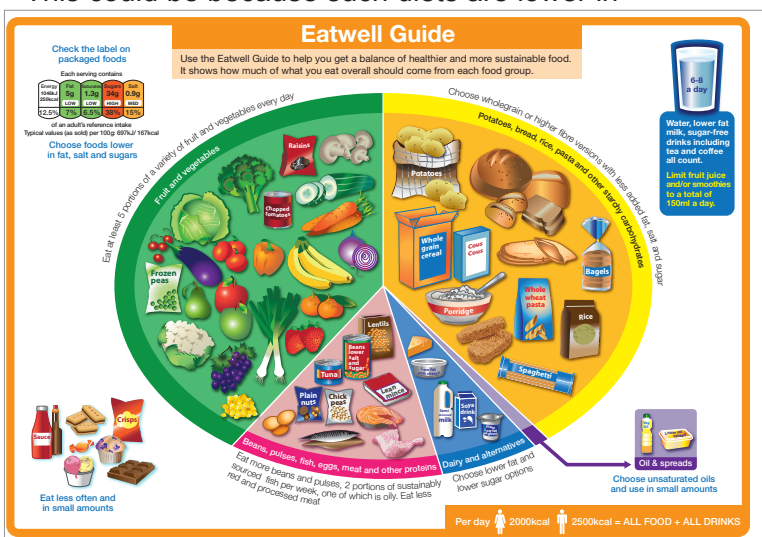
If you eat dairy foods, don't over rely on cheese for protein or you may end up having too much unhealthy saturated fat in your diet.

Iron

Red meat is the most easily absorbed source of iron, but various plant foods also contribute:

- fortified breakfast cereals
- dried fruit
- beans/lentils
- leafy green vegetables
- sesame seeds
- nuts
- wholemeal bread.

To help your body absorb iron from plant foods, include a source of vitamin C with your meal (e.g. vegetables, fruit or a glass of fruit juice).



Calcium

Dairy foods are rich in calcium. If you're not eating these, include plenty of the following:

- tofu
- calcium-fortified foods e.g. soya milk, yoghurts and puddings; rice/oat drinks; and fruit juice
- green leafy vegetables, especially kale and pak-choi, but not spinach. Although spinach contains calcium it is bound to a compound called oxalate. This greatly reduces its absorption making it a poor source of unusable calcium.
- brown/white bread
- sesame seeds/ tahini
- nuts
- dried fruit e.g. apricots and figs.

Vitamin D

Our bodies make vitamin D from sunlight during the spring and summer. At other times of the year eat foods that contain vitamin D, such as:

- most margarines
- fortified brands of soya milks, yogurts and desserts – check the label
- fortified breakfast cereals – check the label
- dried skimmed milk
- fortified yoghurts
- eggs.

Additional supplements are recommended for all pregnant and breastfeeding women, children under five-years-old, people aged over 65 years and people who are not exposed to much sun. Speak to your doctor or a health professional.

Vitamin B12

Eggs and dairy foods contain Vitamin B12. Vegans should include fortified foods containing Vitamin B12 (check the label):

- yeast extract
- soya milk, yoghurts and desserts
- breakfast cereals
- certain brands of rice drinks and oat drinks.

Omega-3 fats

There are two types of omega-3's:

- long versions found in oily fish – docosahexaenoic acid (DHA) and eicosapentaenoic acid (EPA)
- short versions from vegetable oils, particularly flaxseed, walnut, rapeseed and soya oils – alpha linolenic acid (ALA).

The long versions are particularly good for us and current advice recommends eating two portions of

fish a week, one of which should be oily. The short versions may not have the same benefits. Although our bodies can convert some ALA into EPA and DHA, the conversion isn't very efficient. To maximise this conversion:

- avoid foods high in saturated fats
- limit vegetable oils high in linoleic acid (an omega-6 fat) such as safflower, sunflower and corn oils and instead obtain this fat from whole plant foods such as soya
- focus on plant foods that contain ALAs
- If you don't eat fish, consider a supplement made from algae derived DHA, include sea vegetables into your diet or eat foods fortified with DHA.

Zinc

Phytates found in plant foods such as wholegrains and beans reduce zinc absorption, so it's important to eat good sources of zinc-containing foods. Eat fermented soya such as tempeh and miso; beans (soak dried beans then rinse before cooking to increase zinc absorption); wholegrains; nuts; seeds and some fortified breakfast cereals.

Selenium

Meat, fish and nuts are good sources of selenium. If you don't eat meat/fish include some nuts into your diet, especially Brazil nuts.

Iodine

If you're a vegan include small amounts of iodised salt or sea vegetables for your iodine.

Extra care is needed during pregnancy, breastfeeding, weaning and in childhood to make sure that all nutritional needs are met. Speak to a dietitian or other health professional.

Summary

Well-planned vegetarian diets are appropriate for all stages of life and have many benefits. These guidelines will help you enjoy all the health benefits and ensure you're eating a nutritious and complete diet.

Further information:

Food Fact Sheets on other topics including Healthy Eating, Supplements, Calcium and Vitamin D can be found at www.bda.uk.com/foodfacts



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The information sources used to develop this fact sheet are available at www.bda.uk.com/foodfacts

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