

Written by Robert Brayden, MD, Professor of Pediatrics, University of Colorado School of Medicine.

Published by [RelayHealth](#).

Last modified: 2010-05-21

Last reviewed: 2010-01-11

This content is reviewed periodically and is subject to change as new health information becomes available. The information is intended to inform and educate and is not a replacement for medical evaluation, advice, diagnosis or treatment by a healthcare professional.

[References](#)

[Pediatric Advisor 2011.1 Index](#)

© 2011 RelayHealth and/or its affiliates. All rights reserved.

# Vegetarian Diet

## What is a vegetarian?

Vegetarians choose not to eat meat. This includes all animal meat, poultry, and fish. Many vegetarians also avoid other animal products such as gelatin, rennet (used to make some kinds of cheese), and animal fats.

Vegetarians who eat eggs and dairy products are known as ovo-lacto vegetarians. People who do not eat any animal product (including honey) are called vegans.

Semi- or partial-vegetarians sometimes eat poultry or fish, but not beef or pork.

## What are the pros and cons?

A well-planned vegetarian diet is very healthy. By not eating meat, your child eats less cholesterol and saturated fat. This may reduce the risk of heart disease, gallstones, stroke, and certain types of cancer. Teens do not need to worry about growth problems. They will reach a normal adult weight and height without meat.

Younger children sometimes "fill up" too quickly on the higher fiber vegetarian foods and have trouble getting enough calories for proper growth. A healthy vegetarian diet has to be carefully planned to make sure your child gets all the proper nutrients.

## Will my child get all the proper nutrients?

If the meals are well-planned, a vegetarian diet is safe. If the diet is too restricted, or too high in sweets, sodas, and snack foods, it may be unhealthy. Some nutrients may be missing. You need to make sure your child gets enough calcium, iron, zinc, vitamin D, vitamin B-2, vitamin B-12, and healthy fats.

Younger children often have smaller appetites. High fiber plant foods typically have fewer calories and are more filling. Your child may get full before getting enough calories. Serve frequent meals and snacks and use some higher calorie refined foods (such as fortified cereals, breads, and noodles). Choosing foods with higher fat content (healthy unsaturated fats) can help your child with energy and nutrient needs.

- **Calcium:** Milk and dairy products are a great source of calcium. If your child is on a vegan diet and does not eat these products, however, it is harder to get calcium. Good non-dairy sources of calcium include: calcium fortified breakfast cereals, orange juice and soy beverages; tofu prepared with calcium (nigan), bok choy, collard greens, blackstrap molasses, and legumes (peas, beans, lentils). Keep in mind that the calcium found in plant foods and even some fortified foods is not easily absorbed. It is best absorbed if your child eats calcium fortified foods in 2 or more separate small meals or snacks.
- **Iron:** Typical vegetarian diets usually provide enough iron. The problem with iron is that it is not easy for the body to absorb. Iron in meat, poultry, and fish is absorbed much better than iron from plants. Eating foods high in Vitamin C (citrus fruits and tomatoes) along with foods that contain iron helps the body to absorb the iron better. Good non-meat iron sources include: fortified cereals; soybeans, legumes (peas, beans, lentils); potato baked with skin; spinach; blackstrap molasses; prunes, raisins and apricots. Breast-fed babies who are not yet getting solid food should have supplements of iron after the age of 4 to 6 months.
- **Zinc:** Vegetarians may need as much as 50% more zinc than non-vegetarians. Zinc is not as easily absorbed from plant foods as it is from animal products. It is very important for vegetarians to include good sources of zinc in their diet. Plant foods that contain zinc include: fortified whole grains and cereals, legumes (peas, beans, lentils, peanuts), nuts and seeds, and soy foods such as soybeans, milk, tofu, tempeh, and fortified veggie meats.
- **Vitamin B-6:** Also known as pyridoxine, vitamin B-6 is found in legumes (peas, beans, lentils), potatoes baked with skin, banana, and fortified breads and cereals.
- **Vitamin B-2:** Vegans often have lower amounts of B-2. Also known as riboflavin, good non-animal sources of this vitamin include: fortified cereals and soymilk, almonds, asparagus, bananas, legumes, sweet potatoes, tofu, wheat germ and enriched breads.
- **Vitamin B-12:** Vegans need extra vitamin B-12. Also known as cyanocobalamin, B-12 is found naturally in dairy products and eggs. Vitamin B-12 is added to some fortified cereals, fortified soymilk, and some meat substitutes.
- **Vitamin D:** Vegans often have diets that have low amounts of vitamin D. Vitamin D is made in the skin when exposed to sunlight. Some vegetarians may need more outdoor activity or vitamin D supplements. Vitamin D is added to

some fortified cereals and fortified soymilk. If your baby is only getting breast milk, you need to give your baby a vitamin D supplement every day. You can give your baby multivitamin drops that contain vitamin D.

- **Omega-3 fatty acids:** Vegetarians should include good sources of linolenic acid (omega-3) in their diet. Foods high in linolenic acid include flaxseed and flaxseed oil, canola oil, walnuts, soybeans and soybean oil. Omega-3 are naturally found in fish and eggs.

## How do I know if my child is eating a healthy diet?

One of the best ways to check if your child is eating well is to measure your child's weight and height. If your child is not getting enough calories, his or her height and weight will not follow the usual growth patterns for children. Your healthcare provider can check your child's growth on a growth chart.

If your child is not getting enough vitamins or minerals, he or she may have symptoms such as:

- skin rashes
- a painful, swollen tongue
- tiredness
- irritability
- pale skin
- mental slowness
- trouble breathing.

Check with your provider if you are worried about vitamin or mineral deficiency.

## What about breast-feeding?

Vegetarian moms can take care of their own needs as well as produce nutritious breast milk. Make sure that you get enough calcium, zinc, iron, vitamin B-12, and vitamin D.

Many doctors advise staying on prenatal vitamins while breast-feeding. This can be very helpful for vegetarians. The main focus for healthy vegetarian breast milk is on vitamin B12, vitamin D, and omega-3 fats. Ask your doctor if you need a B12 supplement. Your baby may need to take B12 as well.

Breast-fed babies should also take a vitamin D supplement. You can buy liquid multivitamin drops with vitamin D without a prescription. Ask your healthcare provider about this.

If you get enough nutrients from whole grains, fruits, vegetables, beans, nuts, seeds, and oils, you and your baby can have a healthy diet.

### **How can I help my child eat a healthy diet?**

Infants and toddlers need many calories to grow at the normal rate. At about 7 to 8 months of age, babies are ready to start eating protein-rich foods. Instead of pureed meats, you can give your baby other foods high in protein, such as pureed legumes (peas, beans, lentils), cottage cheese, soft tofu, and yogurt.

Also, make sure your toddler eats high-calorie foods such as nut butters and nuts (chopped in small pieces to prevent choking), veggie dips made with olive or canola oil, olives (chopped), dried fruits, and avocados so he will get enough calories. Most healthcare providers warn not to feed your child peanuts and tree nuts until age 2. If you have family history of allergies, some advise waiting until 3 years of age. Make sure your child eats a wide variety of foods.

### **Where can I get more information?**

Some helpful Web sites include:

<http://www.VRG.org>

<http://www.pcrm.org/health/veginfo/vsk/index.html> (available in Spanish)

<http://www.eatright.org> (search "vegetarian")