

Vegetarian Nutrition

Many people choose to follow a vegetarian diet for a variety of different reasons. Regardless of your reason, it's important to be aware of the potential benefits and risks of eliminating meat and/or animal products from your diet.

Possible benefits:

- Increased fruit and vegetable intake
- Decreased saturated fat intake
- More plant-based protein sources
- Increased fiber intake
- Decreased food cost

Possible risks:

- Challenges in social situations
- Nutrient deficiencies
- Excessive dietary restrictions
- Inadequate protein resulting in loss of lean body mass
- Masking symptoms of an underlying eating disorder

A vegetarian diet can be a very healthy and nutrient dense diet. However, it does require responsibility, knowledge, and paying attention to ensure that you are getting all of the nutrients your body needs. Some common nutrients that may need extra attention in a vegetarian diet include:

Iron

A diet lacking this mineral can result in headaches, cold sensitivity, fatigue, and easy bruising.

- Look for iron in dark leafy greens especially spinach, beans, soy products, nuts, dried fruit such as raisins, prunes, and apricots, and seeds including pumpkin, hemp, chia, or flaxseed meal* as well as in oatmeal and grains like quinoa and bulgur.
- Cooking in a cast iron skillet will increase the iron content of any food.
- Plant sources of iron are less easily absorbed. To increase this, couple iron sources with a vitamin C rich food (but not in your cast iron skillet!). Vitamin C sources include citrus fruit and fruit juices, strawberries, broccoli, sweet peppers, kiwi fruit and tomatoes.

B-12

A vegan diet lacking this vitamin can cause weakness, anemia, and diarrhea and can in extreme cases ultimately lead to irreversible brain damage.

- B-12 is found in all animal products including dairy, eggs, and fish. B-12 can be found supplemented in plant milks, fortified cereals and foods such as soy products (tofu), textured vegetable protein (TVP) products like veggie burgers, crumbles, and hot dogs, nutritional yeast, and cheese. Vegans need to supplement their B-12 intake by obtaining this vitamin from at least 3 different sources daily. Vegetarians who include dairy or fish typically get sufficient B-12 in their diet.

Calcium

A diet lacking calcium increases risk for osteoporosis. It is an important mineral in bone health, blood clotting, and nerve health.

- Good sources of calcium include all dairy, non-dairy milks such as almond, soy, or coconut milk, as well as cashews, broccoli, kale, spinach, almonds, hummus, tofu, chia seeds, beans, and flaxseed meal* and other fortified foods.
- Note that plant sources of calcium are less easily absorbed and often in much lower quantities. A supplement may be required to meet estimated needs.

Protein

A deficiency in this macronutrient can cause fatigue, brittle hair and nails, and muscle loss/weakness as well as cravings for carbohydrate rich foods.

- Vegetarian sources of protein include eggs, milk, yogurt, nuts, nut butters, seeds (chia, hemp, flaxseed meal*), legumes, lentils, quinoa, cheese, tofu, tempeh, and TVP products.

Omega-3

Omega-3 fats improve heart and mental health as well as reduce inflammatory responses in the body.

- Vegetarian sources include canola, flaxseed, or hemp oil, as well as tofu, soybeans, walnuts, and seeds (chia, hemp, flaxseed meal*).

With smart planning and habits, vegetarianism can be a healthy choice for you!