



NUTRI-BYTES

Vegetarian Diets: Healthy alternatives?

Are all “vegetarian” diets equal?

Not all vegetarian diets are the same. A **vegan** diet is the most limited type of vegetarian diet. This diet includes only plant foods, such as fruits, vegetables, legumes, grains, seeds, and nuts. A **lacto vegetarian** diet includes plant foods plus dairy products, such as milk and cheese. A **lacto-ovo** vegetarian diet includes eggs in addition to dairy products and plant foods. A **semi-vegetarian** diet excludes red meat, but allows fish, poultry, eggs, dairy products, and plant foods.

Are vegetarian diets healthy?

While some people adopt vegetarian diets due to a concern for animal welfare, the environment, or religious beliefs, many choose vegetarianism for its health effects. Plant-based, vegetarian diets often are healthy with minimally processed foods that are low in calories and fat and packed with nutrients and fiber. But of course, **the quality of any diet depends on the balance, variety, and nutrient value of its foods.** Vegetarian diets that include nutrient-poor foods or limit food choices to only plant foods (such as the vegan diet) may lack essential nutrients.

Tips for planning a healthy vegetarian diet:

Planning is the key to any healthy diet, particularly strict vegetarian diets. The main strategy is to include a wide variety of healthy foods that meet your energy needs. Read food labels and select foods that are nutrient-dense. Pay particular attention to the following nutrients:

- **Protein:** You can include sufficient protein and amino acids in a vegan diet by choosing a variety of protein sources, such as whole grains, legumes, seeds, nuts, and vegetables. Soy foods are excellent sources of protein (with all the essential amino acids!).
 - Examples of protein sources: black beans and rice; stir-fry tofu and vegetables; peanut butter on whole wheat crackers; veggie burgers on whole heat bun
- **Vitamin B₁₂:** This vitamin occurs naturally only in animal foods. Therefore, if you exclude all animal products, you will need to take a vitamin supplement or consume foods that are fortified with vitamin B₁₂, such as some brands of breakfast cereals and soy milk.
- **Vitamin D:** If you do not consume milk products or are not exposed to sunlight on a regular basis, a vitamin supplement is recommended.
- **Iron:** Although iron is found in plant sources such as legumes, spinach, whole wheat breads, dried apricots, prunes and raisin, and fortified breakfast cereals, the form of iron is not as readily absorbed as the iron found in meat. Therefore, you need to eat ample servings of iron-rich plant foods, along with food sources of vitamin C (it increases iron absorption).
- **Zinc:** Since the availability of zinc is decreased by fiber and other binders in plant foods, be sure to include ample and varied sources of zinc, such as whole grains, legumes, nuts, and zinc-enriched cereals in your diet.
- **Calcium:** If you exclude milk products from your diet, you should include plenty of other calcium sources, such as dark green leafy vegetables, legumes, some nuts and seeds, and calcium-fortified foods (e.g., some brands of breakfast cereals, orange juice, and soy milk).



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