



The Vegetarian Option

There are many reasons why people choose to follow a vegetarian diet: moral, religious, environmental, health, or simply variety. Regardless the reason, it is important for vegetarians to plan balanced meals in order to meet nutritional needs.

Is there just one kind of vegetarian?

No, there are five broad categories of vegetarianism: Flexitarian, Pescatarian, Lacto-Ovo, Lacto, and Vegan. In general, vegetarians do not eat meat, but the stringency varies among the different types of vegetarians.

-  **Flexitarian:** Avoids meat, poultry, and fish *most days* of the week. A flexitarian is not a true vegetarian, but chooses to consume mostly vegetarian meals.
-  **Pescatarian:** Does not eat meat or poultry, but will eat fish.
-  **Lacto-Ovo:** Excludes meat, poultry, and fish, but includes dairy and eggs into the diet.
-  **Lacto:** Similar to lacto-ovo vegetarians, however, excludes eggs.
-  **Vegan:** The strictest vegetarians. Omits all meat, poultry, fish, and animal by-products, such as dairy, eggs, gelatin, and honey.

Are there benefits to following a vegetarian diet?

If planned correctly, a vegetarian diet can be very healthy. Vegetarian diets typically contain less saturated fat, cholesterol, and sodium and contain more fiber. However to be sure all nutrient needs are met, proper planning is necessary.



What are important nutrients for vegetarians to include?

Protein

There are two sources of proteins: animal and plant. Animal proteins are referred to as “complete proteins” because they contain all of the essential amino acids our body cannot make on its own. Luckily for vegetarians, our bodies can make complete proteins from the amino acids within various plant-based proteins. By pairing different types of plant-based proteins, we can create complete proteins like a puzzle. Include various sources of plant proteins such as beans, whole grains, soy, nuts, seeds, dairy, and eggs to ensure adequate protein.

Vitamin B₁₂

Vitamin B₁₂ is involved in making healthy red blood cells and nerve cells. Vegetarians, who exclude dairy and eggs especially, should be sure to include B₁₂-fortified foods such as cereal, soy milk, or tofu, as it is only naturally found in animal sources. A B₁₂ supplement may be discussed with a physician if sufficient needs are not being met.

Iron

Iron is a vital nutrient for transporting oxygen throughout our body. Just as there are two sources of protein, there are two sources of iron. Examples of plant-sourced iron includes: cereal, soybeans, pumpkin seeds, dark leafy greens, beans, enriched grains, and peanut butter. Plant-based iron is not absorbed as well as animal sourced iron. However, eating sources of vitamin C or animal-based iron with plant-sourced iron will increase its. Consume with citrus fruits, tomatoes, dairy, or eggs to increase iron absorption.

Calcium

Dairy products are the most well-known sources of calcium. Vegetarians who avoid dairy should include sources such as fortified soy or rice milk, fortified cereal, fortified juice, spinach, kale, broccoli, beans, almonds, sesame seeds, and soybeans. Calcium is one of the most important nutrients for our body. Not only is it important for our bones and teeth, but it is also involved in heart, muscle, and nerve health.

Vitamin D

Vitamin D is a hormone involved in many bodily functions, including calcium absorption. Eggs, dairy, and fortified cereal and soy milk are vegetarian sources of Vitamin D.

Are all vegetarian items healthy?

Not all vegetarian options are created equal. Certain items, like cookies and chips, are vegetarian, but may contain high amounts of sugar, sodium, and saturated fats. Be sure to include varied fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and legumes to ensure a healthy, balanced vegetarian diet. Look for great vegetarian options in the cafeteria:

-  Homemade Orange-Infused Garbanzo Bean Veggie Burger
-  Lemon-Garlic Hummus with Fresh Veggies and Multigrain Pita
-  Pinto Bean & Cheddar baked in a Whole Grain Tortilla
-  Edamame Salad
-  Whole Grain Rotini with Tomato Basil Marinara
-  Black Beans over steamed Cilantro-Lime Brown Rice

