

# Nutrition & Health Fact Sheet:

# VEGETARIAN DIETS

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What is a vegetarian diet?



What are some potential health benefits of a vegetarian diet?



Can a vegetarian diet meet all my nutrient needs?



Spinach and beetroot salad

## What is a vegetarian diet?

Vegetarian diets are plant-based eating patterns that focus on fruits, vegetables, whole grains, legumes, nuts, and seeds. These diets are often considered to be meatless, but not all vegetarian diets need to exclude meat. There are many variations of vegetarian diets and some of the more common ones are semi-vegetarian, pescatarian, and vegan.<sup>1</sup> By recognizing the benefits and nutrients that a vegetarian or plant-based diet provides, it is possible to gain a better understanding about what a vegetarian diet is.

**Vegetarian diets are plant-based eating patterns that focus on fruits, vegetables, whole grains, legumes, nuts, and seeds.**

### Types of Vegetarian Diets

**Vegetarian:** A diet that does not include meat or fish, but often includes eggs, dairy, or both.

**Semi-vegetarian:** A diet that includes small amounts of poultry, eggs, dairy, or fish.

**Pescatarian:** A diet that includes fish, but not other types of meat.

**Vegan:** A diet that does not include products derived from animals



# What are some potential health benefits of a vegetarian diet?

Vegetarian diets have many potential health benefits.

Research shows that vegetarians have a lower risk of death from cardiovascular disease and certain types of cancer.<sup>8</sup> This may be because vegetarian diets often have more fiber and lower saturated fat compared to diets with meat.<sup>9</sup> This is possible because vegetarian diets have more fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and legumes.

The American Institute for Cancer Research, the American Heart Association, and the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute all recommend consuming a diet high in fruits and vegetables.<sup>10, 11, 12</sup>

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## 5 Tips for Planning Healthful Vegetarian Meals.<sup>3</sup>

1

**Build your meals around protein:** Use sources that are naturally low in fat such as: beans, lentils, and rice. Avoid overloading meals with high-fat cheeses to replace meat.

2

**Use calcium-fortified, soy-based beverages such as soy milk:** These can provide calcium in amounts similar to milk, and also be lower in saturated fat.

3

**Turn meat-based foods vegetarian:** Dishes that are made to contain meat can be adapted to be vegetarian. This method is great for eating more vegetables.

4

**Try ethnic cuisines:** Indian, Middle Eastern, Hispanic, and Asian foods have many plant-based dishes that have plenty of protein from beans, nuts, and high-protein grains

5

**Choose complementary foods:** Complementary foods such as beans and rice, tofu and tempeh, or even eggs and dairy allow the right combinations of essential protein to be included in the diet.



Penne pasta with tomato and rucola



Cooked broccoli soup



# Can a vegetarian diet meet all my nutrient needs?

Like all diets, a vegetarian diet should be nutritionally balanced through variety and moderation of foods. Table 1 provides recommendations from the 2015-2020 Dietary Guidelines for Americans following a 2000-calorie diet for adults on a vegetarian diet.<sup>7</sup>

Meat-based diets and plant-based diets provide different amounts of essential nutrients. Nutrients that are common in meat-based diets may be low-in plant based diets and vice versa. Vegetarians should obtain the nutrients that would normally be easy to get from animal foods from different sources.<sup>2</sup>

The stricter a plant-based vegetarian diet is, the more that specific nutrients must be found from other sources.

**Vegetarians should obtain the nutrients that would normally be easy to get from animal foods from different sources.**



Salad table for lunch or dinner








## What is Fortification?



Fortifying foods with nutrients means that more is added to the original amount. For vegetarians, fortified foods are important because excluding

certain food groups may make it difficult to obtain certain nutrients. For example, vegetarians who exclude dairy from their diets should get calcium from a combination of foods that are calcium fortified, such as orange juice or cereal. In some cases, fortified foods are the only option for nutrients such as Vitamin B12 which may be inactive in plants foods. **Know which nutrients you may need a fortified source of, and always remember to check food labels to meet your nutritional requirements.**

## What Are Some Nutrients I Need and Where Can I Get Them?<sup>3, 4, 5, 6</sup>

-  **Protein:** Beans, nuts, quinoa, tofu and other soy-based protein foods.
-  **Iron:** Dried or fortified beans and cereals, spinach, chard, dried fruit
-  **Calcium:** Collard greens, spinach, almonds, soybeans. Calcium-fortified orange juice, fortified cereal, fortified soymilk, and tofu
-  **Zinc:** Whole grains, nuts, legumes
-  **Vitamin B12:** Vitamin supplements, fortified foods (commercial breakfast cereals, soy beverages, nutritional yeast)
-  **Vitamin D:** Fortified dairy products, egg yolks, liver, and fatty fish. Also consider breakfast cereals, soymilk, and supplementation.
-  **Omega-3 Fatty Acids:** Fish, walnuts, and ground flaxseeds.

**Table 1: Vegetarian Food Guide for Adults Following a 2000 Calorie Diet.**<sup>7, 13</sup>

<i>Food Group</i>	<i>Daily Amounts</i>	<i>Examples of Serving Size Equivalents</i>	<i>Examples of Calcium-rich Non-dairy Food Sources*</i>
Vegetables	2 ½ cups	<b>1 cup equivalent of vegetables:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1 cup raw or cooked vegetables</li> <li>• 2 cups raw leafy greens</li> <li>• 1 cup calcium-fortified vegetable juice</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1 cup raw or cooked cress, rhubarb, broccoli</li> <li>• 1 cup calcium-fortified vegetable juice</li> </ul>
Fruits	2 cups	<b>1 cup equivalent of fruit:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1 medium fruit</li> <li>• ½ cup diced or cooked fruit</li> <li>• ¼ cup dried fruit</li> <li>• ½ cup calcium-fortified fruit juice</li> <li>• 5 dried figs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ½ cup calcium-fortified fruit juice</li> <li>• 5 dried figs</li> </ul>
Grains	6 ½ oz-eq <sup>†</sup>	<b>1 oz equivalent of grains:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1 slice bread</li> <li>• 1 cup calcium-fortified ready-to-eat cereal</li> <li>• ½ cup cooked grain, pasta, or cereal</li> <li>• ½ cup brown or white rice</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1 cup calcium-fortified ready-to-eat cereal</li> </ul>
Dairy	3 cups	<b>1 cup equivalent of milk:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1 cup milk</li> <li>• 1 cup yogurt</li> <li>• 1 ½ oz natural cheese</li> <li>• 2 oz processed cheese</li> <li>• 1 cup calcium-fortified soymilk</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1 cup calcium-fortified soymilk</li> </ul>
Protein Foods	3 ½ oz-eq	<b>1 oz equivalent of protein foods:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ¼ cup cooked beans, peas, lentils</li> <li>• ¼ cup tofu</li> <li>• 1 egg</li> <li>• 1 Tbsp nut or seed butter</li> <li>• 1 oz meat substitute</li> <li>• ½ oz nuts</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ¼ cup cooked white beans, red beans, chickpeas</li> <li>• ¼ cup tofu</li> <li>• ½ oz almonds, hazlenuts</li> </ul>
Oils	6 tsp	<b>1 tsp equivalent of oils:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1 tsp. soft margarine, mayonnaise, or oil</li> </ul>	

Note: The information in this table is adapted from Appendix 5 – Healthy Vegetarian Eating Pattern of the 2015-2020 USDA Dietary Guidelines for Americans  
 \*Foods in this column are in 1 serving size equivalents. For those following vegan or ovo-vegetarian diets, the dairy group, except for soymilk, will be omitted.  
 †Ounce Equivalents (oz eq): Cup and ounce equivalents identify the amounts of foods from each food group with similar nutritional content

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