



Vegetarian Nutrition

a dietetic practice group of the
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Experts in Plant-Based Nutrition

RDN Resources for Consumers: Eating Disorders

Eating Disorders: Overview

In the United States, around 30 million adults and adolescents suffer from an eating disorder. The three most common eating disorders are anorexia nervosa (AN), bulimia nervosa (BN), and binge eating disorder (BED). However, there are several other types of eating disorders including avoidant restrictive food intake disorder (ARFID) and other specified feeding or eating disorder (OSFED) among more.

Individuals with eating disorders often share common food beliefs and eating behaviors. Foods are often labeled as “good” and “bad” or “healthy” and “unhealthy.” The “bad” or “unhealthy” foods become unacceptable and avoided. Restrictive diets may also act as a way to eliminate calories for an individual with an eating disorder. This explains why it is common for an individual with an eating disorder to choose to follow a vegetarian or vegan eating pattern.

It is important to understand why someone is following a vegetarian or vegan eating pattern. The reasons may include:

Ethical Considerations. Popular media sources often report ethical concerns related to eating animal-derived foods. Animal welfare is a common reason why someone might follow a vegetarian or vegan eating pattern among other ethical concerns like food insecurity and climate change.

Weight Loss

Some people believe that eating a vegetarian or vegan diet will help them achieve weight loss. A few research studies have found that when people choose

vegetarianism or veganism with a weight loss motivation, they are more likely to experience disordered eating or an eating disorder.

Health Considerations/Food Avoidance

Some individuals may have been encouraged by a health professional to avoid particular animal-derived foods due to their cholesterol and saturated fat content. The USDA cites saturated fat as increasing the risk of cardiovascular disease and recommends eating less of it.

Religious Dietary Laws

Someone’s religion may also influence their dietary patterns. For example, Buddhists, Seventh Day Adventists, and Hindus frequently follow a vegetarian eating pattern.

Understanding the motivation behind your decision to follow a vegetarian or vegan eating pattern may help you determine if your eating has become restrictive and if your reasons are based on ethical, health, weight, religious or environmental motivations.

Nutrients of Concern on a Vegetarian or Vegan Eating Pattern

It can be easy to ensure you are getting a wide variety of nutrients while following a vegetarian or vegan eating pattern if you are consuming an appropriate quantity and variety of foods. However, there are some nutrients that deserve special attention and are often referred to as nutrients of concern in vegetarian and vegan eating patterns:

Protein

If you are eating a sufficient amount of food while

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following a vegetarian or vegan eating pattern, it is likely that you are consuming enough protein. Common sources of protein in a vegetarian or vegan eating pattern include legumes (beans, peas, lentils and peanuts), nuts, seeds, soy foods (such as tofu and tempeh), seitan (made from vital wheat gluten) and legume-based or seitan-based meat alternatives.

Vitamin D

The main sources of vitamin D in the diet are salmon, canned fish, egg yolks and some mushrooms. Someone consuming a vegetarian or vegan eating pattern may or may not consume these foods. However, even these foods contain a rather small amount of vitamin D in comparison to the daily recommended intake which is 600 IU for adults. Taking a supplemental form of vitamin D is the best way to ensure you are ingesting a sufficient amount.

Vitamin B12

Cobalamin, or vitamin B12, is found naturally in many animal-derived foods and absent from plant foods unless it is fortified. Vitamin B12 is a water-soluble vitamin which means our bodies do not store it and it is important to ingest it regularly. Eating B12-fortified foods daily and/or taking a supplemental form of vitamin B12 is the best way to ensure you are ingesting a sufficient amount.

Iron

Iron-deficiency anemia is common with around 3 million cases identified in the United States annually. While individuals following a vegetarian or vegan eating pattern are not the only ones susceptible to iron-deficiency anemia, they may need to pay careful attention to this nutrient. Plant foods that contain iron include lentils, beans, spinach, enriched foods like breakfast cereals, tofu, beans, dried apricots, nuts and seeds, among others. Eating a source of vitamin C (such as strawberries, bell peppers, citrus and tomatoes) with iron-containing plant foods can help your body absorb iron.

Calcium

Calcium and vitamin D work hand in hand to promote strong bones. Calcium is also important for helping our bodies maintain a regular heartbeat. Dairy products are a common source of calcium; therefore, individuals following a vegan eating pattern may need to be vigilant about incorporating plant foods that contain calcium. These foods include calcium-fortified plant milks and juices, collard greens, kale and calcium-set tofu.

If you follow a vegetarian or vegan eating pattern, talk with a registered dietitian nutritionist about whether or not supplementation is appropriate for you.

Working with a Registered Dietitian Nutritionist

If you are unsure of your motivations for following a vegetarian or vegan eating pattern, if you are consuming a sufficient amount of vegetarian or vegan foods, or if you are consuming enough of the nutrients of concern, consider working with an RDN.

Nutrient Intakes and Meal Plans

An RDN can collaborate with you to develop an eating plan that provides your body with the amount and variety it needs for daily living. For an individual with an eating disorder, the appropriate amount and variety of daily nutrition are vital for healing, and an RDN can help create a safe and supportive eating plan using small steps to reach the goal of full recovery.

Conclusion

Recovery from an eating disorder is possible. If you are following a vegetarian or vegan eating plan while working towards recovery, partner with a registered dietitian nutritionist to help support and encourage you through the process. A vegetarian or vegan eating plan during recovery may make it more challenging to consume adequate amounts of certain nutrients typically associated with animal-based foods, such as vitamin D and iron. An RDN can guide you as you make food choices and create meal plans that incorporate all the nutrients your body needs to heal and recover from an eating disorder.