



Vegetarian Nutrition

a dietetic practice group of the
Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics



Experts in Plant-Based Nutrition

RDN Resources for Consumers:

Vegetarian Nutrition for School-Aged Children: Ages 5-18

Children consuming a balanced vegetarian diet offers a healthy alternative to the Standard American Diet (SAD). It is the position of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics that appropriately planned vegetarian, including vegan, diets are healthful, nutritionally adequate, and may provide health benefits in the prevention and treatment of certain diseases.¹

Because vegetarian children often eat more fiber-rich foods from fruits, vegetables and whole grains, and less fat and cholesterol, this may reduce the risk of certain chronic diseases and weight-related illness.

Types of Vegetarians

Lacto-ovo: Includes dairy products and eggs. Excludes meat, poultry, and fish.

Lacto: Includes dairy products. Excludes eggs, foods containing eggs, meat, poultry, and fish.

Vegan: Includes only plant based foods such as fruits, vegetables, beans, grains, seeds, and nuts.

Excludes dairy products, eggs, meat, poultry, fish, and all foods containing these items.

Lacto-ovo, lacto, and vegan vegetarian diets can support healthy growth and development.

Calorie Needs and Growth

All children need more calories during times of rapid growth or increased physical activity. Vegetarian diets are often high in fiber and low in fat. This may cause children to feel full before they consume adequate calories. Watch for sudden changes in your child's growth, activity level and female menses. Include nutrient dense foods and snacks to ensure proper calorie intake, such as essential fats from nuts, seeds, soy products, hummus and avocado.

Protein Needs and Growth

Protein is the building block not just for muscle but for hair, nails, bones, enzymes, skin and blood. While the amount needed is not that high, during growth periods in childhood

close attention is important to meet needs. One equivalent serving = ½ cup cooked beans or lentils, ½ ounce nuts or seeds, 1 cup milk, 2 tablespoons nut or seed butters, 1 egg.

Daily Recommended Protein for Sedentary to Moderately Active Children²

	Age	Servings/day
Children	5-8	4-5 equivalents
Girls	9-13	4-5 equivalents
	14-18	5-6.5 equivalents
Boys	9-13	5-6 equivalents
	14-18	5.5-7 equivalents

Changing to a Vegetarian Diet

Some children are vegetarian from birth, but many families choose to transition later in life. There are many ways to help children make this transition more enjoyable and sustainable. Start by introducing new plant foods gradually. Make familiar foods available. Try making meat-free versions of favorite family meals. Perhaps provide something they love with something new.

If your child wants to become a vegetarian, explore and discuss the reasons. Is it for humane reasons, the climate and environment, dislikes animal foods or other reasons? If you sense that or unintentionally or suspect an eating disorder, speak to their medical physician.

A Healthy Diet for Life

A well-planned vegetarian diet can help form healthy eating habits that lower risk of many chronic diseases. Include whole-grains, fruits, and vegetables often. Limit foods high in saturated fat, sugar, and salt. Consult a registered dietitian (RD) for help with diet assessment and meal planning. To find an RD in your area, visit [Index \(eatright.org\)](https://findanrd.eatright.org) <https://findanrd.eatright.org>

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Meal Ideas

Breakfast	Lunch	Dinner	Snacks
Low sugar cereal with soy or cow's milk, fruit, almonds Pancakes, topped with berries, milk Oatmeal, Apple, Soy milk Tofu scramble, toast, Fruit	Bean & vegetable soup with whole-grain cracker, milk, clementine Green salad with Chickpeas, sunflower seeds, grapes Sun butter sandwich, raw carrots, apple	Pasta & beans with tomato sauce Veggie burger on a bun, pickle, and a peach Tofu stir-fry over brown rice, broccoli, pineapple Chickpea or lentil curry, rice, mandarin orange	Hummus with pita chips or veggies Fruit smoothie, add vegetables, nut butter Raw vegetables with yogurt dip Popcorn

Menu Planning

Provide your child with a balanced and varied diet. Choose unprocessed foods high in nutrients. Focus on foods rich in calcium and iron. Include plant sources of omega-3 fatty acids such as ground flaxseeds and flaxseed oil, ground chia seeds, and walnuts.

Important Nutrients and Good Sources

Protein

- Beans
- Grains
- Tofu
- Meat analogs-seitan
- Nuts and nut butters
- Dairy products
- Eggs

TIP: Protein needs can be easily met if children eat a varied diet.

Vitamin D

- Vitamin D fortified foods (cow's milk, soymilk or rice milk, orange juice, ready-to-eat cereals)
- Eggs
- Skin exposure to sunlight

Iodine

- Iodized salt
- Seaweed(nori)
- Dairy products

Calcium

- Fortified soy or pea protein milk or yogurt
- Fortified orange juice
- Milk and yogurt
- Green leafy vegetables (broccoli, kale, bok choy)
- Calcium-set tofu
- Almonds and almond butter

Read Labels! Milk and yogurt should contain 5+ grams of protein, 30-35% calcium and fortified with vitamin D

- Vegan milk: Soy or pea protein fortified milk
- Animal Milk: 1% or fat free cow or goat milk

Iron

- Whole or enriched grains
- Dried fruits
- Fortified cereals
- Beans, Lentils, Tofu
- Green leafy vegetables

TIP: Include a source of vitamin C (bell peppers, tomatoes, kiwi, citrus fruits) with meals to increase iron absorption.

Vitamin B12

- Fortified soymilk, pea protein, oat or rice milk
- Some meat analogs
- Vitamin B12-fortified nutritional yeast
- Fortified ready-to-eat cereals
- Eggs
- Dairy products

A vitamin B12 supplement may be used

Zinc

- Whole-grain products
- Wheat germ
- Fortified cereals
- Nuts
- Beans

If some family members eat animal products, compliment with legumes and other plant-based foods. Try new plant based recipes or food delivery services that have diverse ethnic food choices for variety.

References

1) V. Melina, W. Craig, S. Levin. Position of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics: Vegetarian Diets. J Acad Nutr Diet. 2016;116:1970-1980.

2) Dietary Guidelines for Americans 2020-2025, ninth edition. Dietaryguidelines.gov

Resources for More Information

Vegan Lunch Box, By Jennifer McCann

Raising Vegetarian Children, By Joanne Stepaniak, Vesanto Melina The Vegetarian Way, By Virginia Messina and Mark Messina

Better Than Peanut Butter & Jelly, By Marty Mattare, Wendy Muldawer