



## 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 Toddlers and Preschoolers

**A well-balanced vegetarian diet supports healthy growth and development of toddlers and preschoolers.**

These early years are key in the establishment of healthy eating habits that will last a lifetime. Vegetarian and vegan diets can provide all the nutrients needed by children at each stage of growth. A registered dietitian can help parents plan healthy meals and create positive eating habits for the whole family.

### Energy Needs and Growth

At age one, weight gain slows, and children often begin to eat less. Eating too many high fiber foods may cause children to feel full before they have eaten enough calories. A well-balanced vegetarian diet is often high in fiber, which can be found in fruits, vegetables, and whole-grains. Incorporating some refined grain products, 100% fruit juices, and peeled fruits and vegetables into a child's diet can help reduce fiber and increase caloric intake if needed.

To increase calories, include high nutrient, high calorie foods such as:

- Avocado
- Nuts/seeds and nut butters
- Dried fruits
- Vegetable oils
- Full-fat soy and dairy products
- Bean spreads (hummus)

### Good Sources of Key Nutrients

#### Protein

- Legumes (e.g. beans, lentils)
- Tofu, tempeh, edamame
- Plant-based meat analogs
- Nuts and nut butters
- Seeds and seed butters
- Grains
- Dairy products
- Soymilk and pea protein-based milk
- Eggs

#### Calcium

- Fortified, unsweetened plant-based milk (e.g. soy, almond, hemp, cashew, pea, oat)
- Fortified 100% orange juice
- Milk, yogurt, and cheese
- Green leafy vegetables (e.g. broccoli, kale, bok choy)
- Tempeh, textured vegetable protein, calcium-set tofu
- Almonds and almond butter
- Tahini
- Corn tortillas
- Great northern beans, navy beans
- Raisins and dried figs

**Tip:** Calcium supplementation may be used to compensate for inadequate dietary intake.

#### Iron

\*Iron deficiency anemia is the most common childhood nutritional problem.

- Whole or enriched grains, bread, and pasta
- Dried fruits
- Fortified cereals
- Beans and legumes
- Green leafy vegetables
- Blackstrap molasses

**Tip:** Include a source of vitamin C with meals to increase iron absorption.

#### Vitamin B12

- Fortified plant milk
- Fortified meat analogs
- Fortified nutritional yeast
- Fortified ready-to-eat cereals
- Eggs
- Dairy products

**Tip:** Vegetarian toddlers and preschoolers should use foods fortified with vitamin B12 and/or vitamin B12 supplements to meet vitamin B12 recommendations.

# RDN Resources for Consumers:

## Vegetarian Nutrition for Toddlers and Preschoolers

### Zinc

- Whole-grain products
- Wheat germ
- Fortified cereals
- Tofu
- Nuts
- Dried beans
- Hard cheese
- Yeast-leavened bread
- Tempeh

### Vitamin D

- Vitamin D fortified foods (e.g. cow's milk, plant milks, orange juice, ready-to-eat cereals)
- Eggs
- Skin exposure to sunlight

### Omega-3 Fatty Acids

- Ground flaxseeds
- Chia and hemp seeds
- Walnuts
- Canola, hemp, walnut, and flax oil

**Tip:** An algae-derived omega-3 supplement may be used.

### Iodine

\*Processed foods and sea salt are not generally good sources of iodine.

- Iodized salt
- Sea vegetables (e.g. dulse, kelp)

### Choking Risks

Toddlers and preschoolers are at an increased risk of choking because of immature chewing and swallowing skills, fewer teeth, and unwillingness to take the time to carefully chew food.

To minimize choking risk, the following foods should be avoided by toddlers or eaten by preschoolers only with supervision:

- Nuts, except when finely ground
- Nut butters by the spoonful
- Vegetarian hot dogs, unless sliced lengthwise and then crosswise

- Cherry tomatoes, unless quartered
- Grapes, unless cut in half. Peeling may be needed for young toddlers.
- Raw cherries, unless pitted and sliced
- Chunks of raw carrots and raw celery
- Popcorn, pretzel nuggets, corn or tortilla chips, potato chips

### Tips for Creating Healthy Eating Habits

- Offer a variety of foods, repeatedly. Children's likes and dislikes often change. It can take several introductions of a new food before kids try it or decide whether they like it.
- Make food fun by cutting it into shapes, adding color with fruits and vegetables, or serving finger foods.
- Set a good example. Let children see you eating healthy foods. Refrain from making negative comments about healthy foods you may dislike.
- Add vegetables, tofu, beans, or fruit to favorite recipes.
- Incorporate fruits, vegetables, and nuts into smoothies and baked goods like muffins, breads, or pancakes.
- Include children in meal planning, grocery shopping, cooking, and mealtime activities.
- Allow preschoolers to choose the portion of food that they want to eat through family-style serving.
- Do not force a child to eat or use food as a reward.
- Limit fruit juice to 4 ounces/day and choose 100% juices.

### Resources

1. Feeding Vegan Kids by Reed Mangels, PhD, RD. <http://www.vrg.org/nutshell/kids.htm>, 2011.
2. Nourish. The Definitive Plant-based Nutrition Guide for Families, by Reshma Shah, MD, MPH and Brenda Davis, RD. Health Communications, Inc, 2020.
3. Vegan for Life, 2nd edition, by Jack Norris, RD and Virginia Messina, MPH, RD. Hachette Books, 2020.

*A registered dietitian can help you develop a healthy vegetarian eating plan that meets your needs.*

**To find an RD in your area, visit [www.eatright.org](http://www.eatright.org)**

The content found in this handout is intended for informational purposes only and is not intended to serve as a substitute for the consultation, diagnosis, and/or medical treatment of a qualified physician or healthcare provider. Please use this handout in conjunction with your dietitian.