

# Vegetarian child

Reviewed by SickKids Staff | Last updated: July 4th 2008

This article describes what to do when your child decides to become a vegetarian.

## Key points

- Vegetarian diets can be perfectly healthy for children.
- There are different kinds of vegetarian diets.
- Vegetarians must take special care to get enough calories and essential nutrients.



Vegetarian diets can be very healthy - even for growing children. Parents should know that a good vegetarian diet can provide many health benefits and protect against certain diseases. In fact, the whole family may benefit from even a slight vegetarian shift in diet.

## If your child wants to be a vegetarian

Ask your child why they want to be a vegetarian. There may be one or many reasons. Moral, economic, environmental and health reasons, all spur people on to choose a vegetarian diet.

The answer may help show what steps need to be taken next.

## Different types of vegetarianism

The reasons why a child might decide to become a vegetarian may also affect what kind they

practice.

## Vegan

A vegan diet is the strictest of the vegetarian diets. Vegans exclude all animal products. A strict vegan will not eat any meats or fish, and will abstain from milk and eggs. Some vegans will not eat honey because it is made by bees, and may choose not to wear any animal products such as leather.

## Ovo and lacto vegetarian diets

Ovo and lacto vegetarians still do not eat meat but will eat eggs (ovo) and/or milk (lacto).

## Other vegetarian diets

Some avoid beef and pork but eat fish and shellfish (pesco-vegetarians). They may even eat fowl such as chicken and turkey. Others may avoid meat only when it is convenient, thus reducing its consumption. These diets are 'quasi or semi' vegetarian: eliminating or just reducing red meat.

## Keeping a nutrient balance

The type of vegetarian diet chosen decides the steps needed to make sure a healthy balance of nutrients, and in some cases calories, is kept. For example, a vegan diet will require a lot more attention to other sources of nutrients than an ovo or lacto vegetarian diet.

Depending on your child's age, you should involve them in their own diet. Have them take some responsibility for the changes they are making. Your child will have to learn where they can get the essential nutrients they used to get from meats and dairy products.

These nutrients are protein, calcium and vitamin D, vitamin B12, iron and zinc.

What should I know about raising a vegetarian child?

Go to:

<https://www.youtube.com/embed/4QyvzoTD3YU>

to view this web only media.

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## Protein

While most people probably get the majority of their protein from animals there are lots of vegetable sources of protein, including lentils, beans, peas, tofu and peanut butter.

Proteins are made of different amino acids, eight of which are considered 'essential' to human health. This is because these eight cannot be made by the human body. Although these eight essential amino acids cannot be consumed from one single vegetable source, eating a variety of vegetable sources will provide all the essential amino acids needed. A variety of foods such as split pea soup and whole grain crackers, black beans added to vegetable soup with whole grain bread, or a vegetable-tofu stir fry will provide all eight essential amino acids.

## Calcium

Often, dairy products are a person's main source of [calcium](#). However, there are many ways to get calcium. Fortified orange juice, soy beverage, dark green leafy vegetables such as broccoli, kale and chives, are just a few. You can also get calcium from cabbage, almonds, beans, tahini and figs.

## Vitamin D

Whether a person is a vegetarian or not, they should be supplementing their diet with [vitamin D](#). It aids in the absorption of calcium and helps maintain strong bones. Many soy drinks are vitamin D fortified.

## Vitamin B12

Most sources of [B12](#) come from animal products such as eggs and dairy. Vegetarians will need to get their B12 from a supplement.

## Iron

Although [iron](#) can be found in both animal and plant products, the iron found in plants is not as well absorbed by the body. However, iron from plant sources is better absorbed if combined with a source of vitamin C. For example, eat dark green leafy vegetables (for the iron) combined with beans (for the vitamin C). Or, try whole grain pasta with tofu.

Iron can also be found in lentils, dried fruit, nuts, fortified cereals and breads, and enriched pasta.

## A word about calories

Because many calories in a regular diet come from animal fats, vegetarians, especially growing ones, may have to eat larger portions. You can also cook with extra olive or canola oil to get enough calories.

## Changes to dinner at home

If your child does become a vegetarian, this change will likely affect the whole family. To what degree depends on the type of vegetarian diet your child wants to follow. It also depends on the family's usual diet.

For example, if your family often eats tofu, beans and other legumes, vegetables, and sometimes eats vegetarian meals, very little will have to change to accommodate your child's diet.

On the other hand, if your family is very 'meat and potatoes,' eats few vegetables, and has never heard of tofu, more changes will have to take place. If this does describe your family's eating habits, it may be that your child may improve the eating habit of the whole family.

The [Meant2Prevent: Kitchen](#) website has some healthy meal ideas for your vegetarian child.

## Sources

American Dietetic Association, Dietitians of Canada. (2003). Position of the American Dietetic Association and Dietitians of Canada: Vegetarian Diets. *Canadian Journal of Dietetic Practice and Research*, 103(6), 748-65.

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