

## **Vegetarian diets for children and teens**

With good planning, a vegetarian diet can be a healthy choice that meets your growing child's nutritional needs. Talk to your doctor about your child's diet to make sure they are getting everything they need and growing well.

### **What is a vegetarian diet?**

A vegetarian diet means not eating the flesh of any animal. Some vegetarians also choose not to eat any food that comes from animals (like dairy products or eggs). Here are the different types of vegetarian diet:

- Vegan: eats only non-animal foods.
- Lacto-vegetarian: eats non-animal foods plus dairy (no eggs).
- Ovo-vegetarian: eats non-animal foods plus eggs (no dairy).
- Lacto-ovo vegetarian: eats non-animal foods plus eggs and dairy products.

### **Are vegetarian diets safe for babies and children?**

Well-planned vegetarian diets can support pregnancy, breastfeeding and growth during infancy and childhood. However, the safety of extremely restrictive diets such as fruitarian (a diet that consists entirely or primarily of fruits, and possibly nuts and seeds) and raw foods diets has not been studied in children.

Like any diet that doesn't include certain foods, some vegetarian diets make it harder to get enough energy, protein, and certain nutrients. Some nutrients—like vitamin B12—are only found in animal sources, such as cow's milk. Iron, which is very important for babies and children, is more easily absorbed by the body when it comes from meat. So if your child's diet doesn't include animal foods, you'll need to ensure these nutrients come from other sources. The chart below may help.

# Are vegetarian diets safe for teens?

Puberty is a time of great change, and teens need a lot of energy and nutrients to get them through it. Be aware of your teen’s eating habits and help them eat the foods they need to stay healthy. If you think your teen isn’t eating well, speak to your doctor or a dietitian.

## How can vegetarian parents properly feed their baby?

Those who are pregnant or nursing should speak to a dietitian to ensure they are getting enough vitamins and minerals as described in the chart below.

Exclusive breastfeeding provides adequate nutrition until 6 months of life. Babies who are exclusively breastfed should get a supplement of vitamin D every day. Breastfeeding can continue for two years or longer.

Around 6 months, you can begin to introduce other foods to your baby. Vegetarian babies should get the same variety of vegetables, fruits and iron-fortified cereals as other babies. A vegetarian diet should contain a variety of foods high in omega-3 fatty acids and enough protein sources to meet your baby’s nutrition needs.

## A healthy vegetarian diet should include:

<b>Energy (calories)</b>	<p>Vegetarian diets may have fewer calories than diets that include meat and dairy products. If your child is eating a well-balanced vegetarian diet, is gaining a healthy amount of weight and has lots of energy, then they are probably getting enough calories. Vegans might need extra sources of energy. Foods that are a high in energy include soy products, avocado, soy and canola oils, nuts and nut butters.</p> <p>Small, frequent meals and snacks for toddlers may help increase the amount of calories they get.</p>
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	<b>Protein</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Protein helps to build, maintain and repair tissues in the body. Your child is probably getting enough protein if their diet has enough calories and includes many different kinds of plant foods. Foods such as legumes, cereals, nuts and seeds and their butters are rich in proteins.</li> </ul>
	<b>Fibre</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Fibre is a nutrient found in all plants. It helps with digestion and blood circulation. Pay close attention to the amount of fibre your child is eating. It's possible to eat too much fibre. This may fill your child up so that they don't eat enough calories overall and it can affect the amount of calcium, iron or zinc the body absorbs.</li> </ul>
<b>Minerals</b>	<b>Iron</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Babies and children need iron to make enough red blood cells and for their brains to develop normally. Some vegetables are a source of iron, but iron from plant foods isn't absorbed as well as iron from meat foods. Cereals with added iron, grain products, dried beans and peas are good sources of iron. Talk to your doctor to see if your child needs an iron supplement.</li> </ul>
	<b>Calcium</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Calcium is important for the growth and development of strong bones and teeth. Vegetables that have calcium include broccoli, sweet potatoes, great northern and navy beans, and leafy greens. You can also offer soy milk or orange juice that is fortified with extra calcium.</li> </ul>
	<b>Zinc</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Zinc is an important mineral, especially for adolescents. It helps with growth, brain and sexual development. The best sources of the mineral zinc are meat, poultry, fish and yogurt. Some foods have zinc added to them, such as whole grains, wheat germ, brown rice, legumes, and spinach. Ask your doctor whether your child should take a supplement.</li> </ul>

	<b>Fat and fatty acids</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fat is an important part of a healthy diet. It helps the brain and nervous system develop correctly. Some vegetarian children eat less fat. Vegans can lack essential fatty acids because they are found mainly in fish and eggs. Fatty acids are important for brain and vision development. You can find them in canola oil, flaxseed oil and many nuts.</li> <li>• Soy formulas are recommended for vegetarian infants who do not consume any milk products until they are 2 years of age.</li> </ul>
<b>Vitamins</b>	<b>Vitamin D</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Helps the body absorb calcium.</li> <li>• Products that are fortified with vitamin D include: cow's milk, margarine, infant formula. Most soy milk beverages contain vitamin D. Check the nutrition facts table on the package.</li> </ul>
	<b>Vitamin B12</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vitamin B12 is only found in animal foods, including dairy products and eggs. Offer your child foods that are fortified with vitamin B12, such as many cereals, breads, and soy and rice drinks.</li> </ul>

## What if my child follows a vegan diet?

Children following vegan diets may need a vitamin and mineral supplement, and additional calories. Please talk to your family doctor or dietitian to make sure your child is growing well and is getting the right type and amounts of nutrients.

## Additional resources

- What You Need to Know to Raise a Healthy Vegetarian Child (Dietitians of Canada)  
(<https://www.unlockfood.ca/en/Articles/Vegetarian-and-Vegan-Diets/What-You-Need-to-Know-to-Raise-a-Healthy-Vegetaria.aspx>)

- Canada's Food Guide (Health Canada)  
(<http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/fn-an/food-guide-aliment/index-eng.php>)
- What You Need to Know About Vitamin B12 (Dietitians of Canada)  
(<https://www.unlockfood.ca/en/Articles/Vitamins-and-Minerals/What-You-Need-to-Know-About-Vitamin-B12.aspx>)

## Reviewed by the following CPS committees

- Community Paediatrics Committee

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