

# VEGETARIAN CHOICES

## Nutrition News You Can Use



Learn the facts about the health benefits of vegetarian choices and their role in a healthy diet.

### Who makes vegetarian choices?

Currently about 5 million people in the U.S. are vegetarians and that number is expected to rise. Making vegetarian choices is becoming more popular due to the growing interest in healthy foods and increased concern about obesity. People make vegetarian choices for a variety of reasons including health, religion, taste and economics. Vegetarian diets are consistent with the 2010 Dietary Guidelines for Americans which focus on the importance of vegetables, fruits, whole grains, and low-fat dairy as the core of a healthy diet.

### Do all vegetarians follow the same rules?

Not all vegetarians are alike. Generally, vegetarians eat mostly plant-based foods and avoid animal products such as meat, poultry, and fish. However, there are different types of vegetarian diets which are defined by the foods they include. Many vegetarians include dairy and egg products in their daily meals. Vegans choose to restrict all animal products including dairy, eggs, and even honey. Recently the words semi-vegetarian and flexitarian are being used to describe people who are vegetarian on most days but may occasionally eat meat, poultry, or fish.

### What are the health benefits of making vegetarian choices?

The American Cancer Society and the American Heart Association recommend eating plant-based foods to reduce the risk of chronic diseases. Research shows that there is a wide range of health benefits associated with vegetarian choices. Vegetarians are at lower risk for obesity, hypertension, heart disease,

high cholesterol, diabetes, and some types of cancers. Vegetarian choices are rich in nutrients such as fiber, magnesium, potassium, folate and antioxidants, making them a healthy addition to your diet.

### What foods are vegetarian and where do I find them?

Many everyday foods are vegetarian such as cereal, oatmeal, grilled cheese, yogurt, peanut butter and jelly, and plain pizza. In fact, most of the foods we eat that are the staples of a well-balanced diet such as vegetables, fruits, low-fat dairy, whole grains, beans and nuts are vegetarian. It is easy to turn a typical dish into a vegetarian choice by substituting vegetables or beans for the meat. Veggie burgers, soy products, tofu and other meat substitutes are increasing in popularity and can easily be found in many restaurants and supermarkets. These items provide additional nutrition and variety to a well-balanced diet.

### Without meat how do I get enough protein?

Protein can be found in a variety of sources other than meat. Dairy, eggs, beans, nuts, and soy products are all good sources of protein. Grains and vegetables also provide some protein in the diet. Vegetarians should have no problem getting adequate protein if they eat enough total calories from a wide variety of plant-based foods.

### Are there any risks of following a vegetarian diet?

While vegetarian choices are beneficial to your health, proper planning is necessary to meet vitamin and mineral requirements. Since vegetarians eat mainly plant-based foods, they



Our dietitians receive hundreds of questions each year about a wide variety of nutrition topics. Their timely and trustworthy insights and ideas can help you and your family live healthier lives.

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must pay close attention to specific nutrients that usually come from meat or dairy such as iron, zinc, calcium, vitamin D and vitamin B12. Eating a variety of plant-based foods in addition to fortified cereals, juices, and soy products is a good way to meet your dietary needs.

### **Are vegetarian diets good for children?**

Vegetarian diets can be healthy and safe for all ages. Studies show that children who grow up in vegetarian communities are leaner and grow to the same heights as non-vegetarian children. Research also shows that vegetarian children are at less risk for obesity and have lower cholesterol levels. To keep up with their rapid growth children and adolescents must make sure to get enough calories and important nutrients. They can do this by eating a wide variety of plant-based food such as vegetables, fruits, whole grains, beans and nuts. Milk, cheese, and yogurt will provide calcium and protein required for bone health and proper growth. Variety and balance is extremely important to raising a healthy vegetarian child.

### **Will making vegetarian choices impact my energy level?**

Famous vegetarian athletes such as Joe Namath, Hank Aaron, and Serena Williams had enough energy for award-winning athletic performances. Vegetarian choices can provide you with enough energy to lead a physically active lifestyle. Eating vegetarian snacks that combine carbohydrate and protein will help avoid drops in energy. Bananas with peanut butter or yogurt smoothies are good snacks for an energy boost.

### **Does it cost more to make vegetarian choices?**

Vegetarian choices do not have to cost any more than non-vegetarian foods. Substitute products such as veggie and bean burgers, textured vegetable protein, and soy are comparable in price to meat. You can cut costs by shopping at a farmer's market for fresh seasonal fruits and vegetables, cooking from scratch instead of buying pre-made vegetarian meals, and by substituting vegetables and beans for meat.

### **Make a healthy lifestyle choice; include vegetarian choices in everyday meals.**

Vegetarian choices are healthy for people of all ages and may help reduce your risk of certain chronic diseases. According to the American Dietetic Association, a well-balanced diet for vegetarians includes grains, legumes, nuts, seeds, vegetables, fruits, and foods high in calcium. A healthy diet also limits foods high in saturated fat, salt, and sugar. Remember, vegetarian choices are not just for vegetarians.

### **To learn more about vegetarian choices please visit:**

**[www.vrg.org](http://www.vrg.org)**  
**(The Vegetarian Resource Group)**



Since everyone's health history and nutritional needs are so different, please make sure that you talk with your doctor and a registered dietitian to get advice about the diet and exercise plan that's right for you.