



# Feeding Your Child a Vegetarian Diet

Patient and Family Education

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## What is a vegetarian diet?

A vegetarian diet includes plant foods and may or may not include eggs or dairy. There are three types of vegetarians:

1. **Lacto-ovo-vegetarians** eat milk, cheese, yogurt, and eggs.
2. **Lacto-vegetarians** eat milk, cheese, and yogurt.
3. **Vegans** avoid eating meat, poultry, fish, seafood, eggs, milk, cheese and yogurt.

## Can I feed my child a healthy vegetarian diet?

Yes, when their diet is planned right, your child can get all of the nutrition they need to grow and be healthy on a vegetarian diet. A well planned vegetarian diet can offer many advantages. The diet is low in saturated fat, cholesterol and high in complex carbohydrate, fiber, magnesium, folate, antioxidants and phytochemicals.

## What else do I need to know?

**Calories:** Vegetarian foods tend to be lower in calories so your child has to eat a larger amount of foods to get the calories he needs. Whole grains, dried fruits, beans, nuts, avocado and seeds will give your child's body enough calories for energy and normal growth. Nuts and seeds have even more calories and protein. Give children under 5 years of age nut butters instead of nuts to prevent choking.

**Protein:** Protein needs are met when a variety of plant foods are consumed. Although many plant foods contain protein, not all are "complete". Many plant proteins do not have all the basic amino acids needed by the body. To make sure that your child gets all that he needs, it is important to give him a variety of protein-rich foods each day. The proteins found in milk, eggs, tofu and cheese are the most complete sources of amino acids. If your child is eating any of these foods on a daily basis, you do not have to worry about him getting enough protein. A baby's diet after 7 to 8 months can include protein foods such as pureed tofu, well cooked legumes, tempeh cheese and well cooked egg yolks.

**Vitamin B-12:** This vitamin is only found in animal foods and helps make red blood cells. If your child is a vegan, give a supplement with vitamin B-12 or serve your child vitamin B-12 fortified soymilk, 1 tablespoon red star vegetarian yeast, 1 ounce fortified cereal, 1½ ounce fortified meat substitute.

**Vitamin D:** Vitamin D helps the body absorb calcium to build and maintain healthy bones and teeth. The body can make Vitamin D with the help of sunlight absorbed through the skin. If your child plays outdoors often, he will likely have enough vitamin D. You can also get Vitamin D from foods such as egg yolks, sunflower seeds, Vitamin D-fortified milks, and Vitamin-D fortified cereals.

**Calcium:** Calcium is needed to help build and maintain strong bones and teeth. Milk products are good sources of calcium. Plant sources include: calcium-set tofu; calcium-fortified soymilk and orange juice; legumes, and 1 cup dark green leafy vegetables such as kale, spinach, and mustard or turnip greens, ¼ cup almonds, 1 tablespoon blackstrap molasses, Bok-choy – tofu prepared with calcium.

## In case of an urgent concern or emergency, call 911 or go to the nearest emergency room right away.

This is general information and is not specific medical advice for your child. Always consult your child's doctor or other healthcare provider if you have any questions or concerns about the care or health of your child. A Children's Healthcare of Atlanta pediatric advice nurse is available 24 hours a day at 404-250-KIDS.

## Feeding your Child a Vegetarian Diet, continued

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**Iron:** Good sources of iron include whole grains, dry beans, iron-fortified cereals, nuts, seeds, dried fruits, and dark-green leafy vegetables. Iron is needed to carry oxygen in the body. To absorb the most iron from plant foods, have your child eat or drink foods high in vitamin C at the same meal. Good examples include beans in tomato sauce, orange juice with breakfast cereals, or vitamin C fortified apple juice with a peanut butter sandwich.

**Riboflavin:** Good sources of riboflavin are bananas, beans, broccoli, asparagus, figs, lentils, kale, peas, seeds, sesame, soy products, and wheat products.

**Omega 3 Fats:** Foods rich in omega 3 fats are 1 tablespoon of flaxseed oil, 3 teaspoons of canola or soybean oil, ¼ cup walnuts. In order to have a good balance of fats in your diet, include foods rich in omega 3 fats.

**Zinc:** Zinc is needed for normal growth. Milk, nuts, seeds, legumes and beans are good sources of zinc.

### Tips for feeding vegetarian children:

- Offer high calorie foods such as tofu, nuts, and seeds. Cook with vegetable oils to make sure your child gets enough calories to grow well.
- Plan for regular snacks. Since many plant foods are low in calories a lot more food needs to be eaten. Breaking food into frequent meals and snacks allows your child to get enough calories without overeating at meals.
- If your child does not drink cow's milk, offer fortified soymilk to provide enough vitamin D, protein, calcium, zinc and Vitamin B-12 each day.
- To be sure your child does not choke, it is best to give children under 5 years of age nut butters and purees instead of nuts and seeds.

### Who should I call if I have questions about feeding my child a vegetarian diet?

Call your child's nutritionist or your child's doctor.

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