

Key Nutrients

Vegetarians can rest assured, plant-based foods are loaded with nutrients including ample protein, iron and calcium

Whether you eat a vegetarian or non-vegetarian diet, the key to health is simple. **Include a wide variety of different foods in your diet** – no one food source is nutritionally complete by itself. Vegetarians choose foods from grains, vegetables, legumes, nuts, seeds and fruits. Whole unrefined foods are best. Eggs and dairy are optional. On a plant-based diet, you will have the distinct advantage of obtaining nutrients from sources high in fibre, and low in saturated fat and cholesterol.

Protein

It was once thought that foods had to be combined within a single meal to provide complete protein but it is now clear, as stated by the American Dietetic Association and Dietitians of Canada, that conscious combining of plant foods at a given meal is not necessary. Most people can easily meet their protein needs by eating a variety of whole grains, legumes, and vegetables on a daily basis. Although there is somewhat less protein in a vegetarian diet, this is actually an advantage, as excess protein has been linked to heart disease, strokes, various cancers, kidney stones and osteoporosis. Foods high in protein include tofu, tempeh, TVP, beans, nuts, seeds, soy milk, eggs, cheese, yoghurt and dairy milk.

Iron

Only about one fifth of the iron in a standard diet comes from meat. Dairy products are deficient in iron. The richest plant sources are dark green vegetables, soy products and legumes, whole grains, dried fruits, nuts and seeds. Cooking with cast-iron pots also contributes to dietary intake. Adding foods high in vitamin C to your meals, such as fruits and greens, enhances iron absorption. Foods that contain factors that decrease absorption include: tea, coffee, milk, cheese, spinach, rhubarb, Swiss chard and chocolate.

Calcium

Dairy products are high in calcium, but needs can also be met on a well planned vegan diet (containing no animal-source foods). Rich plant food sources include dark green vegetables such as broccoli, bok choy and kale, beans, tofu (made with calcium), tahini, sesame seeds, almonds, figs, seaweeds, and fortified soy milks. Since the consumption of animal protein increases calcium requirements, a person following a vegan diet may have much lower needs. Although some plant foods contain oxalates and phytate which can inhibit calcium absorption, the calcium in plant foods is generally well absorbed.

Vitamin D

This vitamin is essential for the absorption of calcium and is formed in the presence of direct or indirect sunlight. Your body stores vitamin D during the summer for winter use. On average, about 10 to 15 minutes a day of sun on the face and hands for light-skinned people should suffice. Darker-skinned people, the elderly, and those at higher latitudes may need more sun exposure. Sunscreen lotion rated SPF 8 or above prevents vitamin D synthesis. Dairy products and some soy milks are fortified with vitamin D. People getting insufficient sun or not eating fortified foods should consider taking a daily multiple vitamin with 400 IU of vitamin D.

Zinc

Zinc is readily available in many plant foods – whole grains (breads, pasta, rice), wheat germ, tofu, tempeh, miso, legumes, sprouts, nuts and seeds – as well as eggs and dairy products.

Vitamin B₁₂

Vitamin B₁₂ is produced by micro-organisms in the soil. In the past, root vegetables contained adequate amounts of B₁₂. Today root vegetables are cleaned so well that all traces of B₁₂ are removed. Meat-eaters acquire B₁₂ through micro-organisms living in the animal flesh they eat. Lacto-ovo vegetarians receive B₁₂ through eggs and dairy products. Obtaining enough B₁₂ through a vegan diet is more challenging. Although cases of B₁₂ deficiency are rare, it can cause pernicious anemia, a serious deficiency disease. Confirmed vegan sources include fortified soy milks, other fortified foods, vitamin pills, and Red Star nutritional yeast (T-6635+). Red Star is available at many natural food stores. Long term studies of vegans have detected a very low rate of B₁₂ deficiency. In fact, more meat-eaters than vegans suffer from this deficiency due to problems absorbing B₁₂. The human body stores a 2–7 year supply of vitamin B₁₂. It's especially important for women to ensure B₁₂ intake when pregnant or breastfeeding.

All other vitamins, minerals, fats and carbohydrates are widely found in the plant kingdom. These nutrients can be easily obtained by maintaining variety in a plant food diet.

If you have difficulty adapting to a vegetarian diet it may be that your body needs a few months to adjust and detoxify. Try experimenting with a variety of different foods and cooking methods. If you have concerns about a nutrient deficiency, you can always have your blood tested, but rest assured that a varied vegetarian diet lacks no nutrients and is proven to be a powerful health promoting choice. Bon appetit!

Dietary Double Standard?

When a non-vegetarian gets sick, people assume it's because of stress, overwork, germs, lack of sleep or just chance; but if a vegetarian gets the same illness it is often their diet which is suspect.

Recommended reading:

www.veg.ca/living/nutrition.html

Up-to-date information on vegetarian nutrition.

Becoming Vegetarian, V. Melina, RD, B. Davis, RD, 2003.

An excellent book by three Canadian Dietitians.

Becoming Vegan, B. Davis, RD, V. Melina, RD, 2001.

Vegetarian Diets - Position Paper

Dietitians of Canada and American Dietetic Association, 2003. Can be viewed from www.veg.ca or available in print from our office.

Vegetarian Starter Kit, Physicians Committee for Responsible

Medicine, 1994. This 16-page booklet can be viewed at www.pcrm.org

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TVA has a Resource Centre open to the public (call for hours or see www.veg.ca). We have a good selection of books for sale or loan.



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