

Today's

Diet & Nutrition

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The Well-Fed Vegetarian

Make sure your meatless diet doesn't come up short nutritionally.

When my daughter and I became vegetarians, I didn't envision it would last very long. How, I wondered, would I replace our daily habit of eating chicken or turkey?

Surprisingly, three years later, we're still vegetarians. Not that it was easy. Doing it right was a challenge in the beginning because we had so many questions. Would we get the right vitamins and minerals? Would our diet fall short nutritionally? Did we really need to eat meat to be healthy?

If you're considering going meatless, here's how to make sure your vegetarian diet is nutritionally sound:

PROTEIN, IRON, AND ZINC

"If vegetarians just cut out meat from their diet without putting back plant proteins, they're destined to be deficient in protein, iron, and zinc," says Dawn Jackson Blatner, RD, LDN, author of *The Flexitarian Diet* and an American Dietetic Association (ADA) spokeswoman. That's probably what accounts for the misconception that vegetarians must be anemic.

Plant-based proteins include beans, lentils, and legumes, and if you don't get enough of them, you may experience fatigue, lethargy, and more than your share of colds and flu.

"For every ounce of meat you would have eaten, eat ¼ cup of beans or lentils," says Blatner. As the adage goes, eat beans at every meal.

CALCIUM AND VITAMIN D

Most people get their calcium and vitamin D from fortified cow's milk and dairy products. Lacto-ovo vegetarians, who eat dairy and eggs, and lacto vegetarians, who eat dairy but no eggs, can similarly count on dairy to get enough calcium and vitamin D.

But vegans, who do not eat dairy or eggs, can turn to fortified soy, almond, or rice milk—about two to three cups daily depending on their overall calorie needs—to fulfill these requirements. Check labels on these milks to make sure they are fortified.

"You can get some calcium and D, which ensures bone health and regulates metabolism among other functions, from cheese [if you're not vegan], but cheese is higher in calories and saturated fats, so limit it to 1 or 2 ounces daily," says Andrea Giancoli, MPH, RD, an ADA spokesperson based in Los Angeles.

OMEGA-3s

Pesco-vegetarians, or pescatarians, eat fish, but if you don't include fish in your diet, consider other sources of omega-3 fats to fill that nutrient gap. Omega-3s lower cholesterol and keep your arteries from clogging.

You can nab these benefits from chia seeds, ground flaxseeds, walnuts, and walnut and flaxseed oils. Plant-based omega-3s are slightly different than animal-based varieties and may contain slightly less EPA and DHA compounds (the essential nutrients that provide health benefits) but, Blatner says, they are still highly advantageous to your health.

VITAMIN B₁₂

Vitamin B₁₂ deficiency is really a concern only for vegans. If you don't consume any animal-based products, you can get B₁₂ from nutritional yeast. (Think of it as the vegan equivalent of Parmesan cheese.) If you're vegan and don't eat nutritional yeast, take a B₁₂ supplement, Blatner advises.

Nonvegan vegetarians can get enough B₁₂ from milk, eggs, yogurt, and cheese if they're eating these items daily.

FAUX MEAT FIXATION

One mistake some vegetarians make is basing their veggie diets on faux meats, replacing all meat with processed mock meat such as fake corn dogs, faux chicken nuggets, and packaged veggie burgers.

“Their grocery carts are not filled with beans and lentils, fresh fruit, and vegetables but with all these boxed, processed faux meats,” says Blatner.

These products are fine occasionally and can be time-savers, but if you’re eating processed faux meat for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, you may be loading up on sodium and sugars and forgoing taste as well as the health benefits of fruit, veggies, and legumes. Swap at least one meal of packaged meat substitutes each day for beans, legumes, or lentils.

MINUS THE MEAT

Yet another group of vegetarians may just subtract the meat from their plates. If a typical meal contains chicken breast, sweet potatoes, and broccoli, they’ll just skip the chicken breast and eat the rest. Problem is, they’ll fall short in many nutrients. Plus, sweet potatoes and broccoli don’t make a nutritionally complete meal; they contain no protein, iron, or zinc.

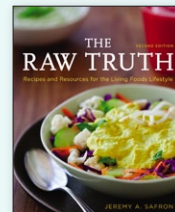
Instead of simply skipping the meat, replace it with beans, lentils, or legumes or, occasionally, a faux meat; don’t just omit the meat from your plate.

With a little knowledge and preparation, you can enjoy a healthy vegetable-based diet that is as nutritionally sound and fulfilling as any meat-based diet. 🍃

— Jennifer Nelson

NOT FOR VEGETARIANS ONLY

Get a good introduction to the raw foods movement and a cache of recipes from an expert, raw foods restaurateur Jeremy A. Safron. You’ll find nearly 200 recipes in the second edition of *The Raw Truth: Recipes and Resources for the Living Foods Lifestyle*. www.tenspeed.com



Vegans don’t have to miss out on their favorite blue-plate specials. Julie Hasson offers a satisfying collection in *Vegan Diner: Classic Comfort Food for the Body & Soul*. Whether you crave eggs Benedict or rice pudding, Hasson delivers the flavor without the dairy. www.runningpress.com



For those who have a yen for meatless Asian flavors and want to dine in, Vegetarian Plus offers internationally inspired gourmet meat alternatives. Among the most popular of the frozen meals is the all-natural and cholesterol-free Vegan Kung Pao Chicken, and other favorite options include Vegan Tuna Rolls and Vegetarian Ginger Chicken. www.vegeusa.com



Although not necessarily strictly vegetarian, the recipes in three new books give vegetarians—and everyone else—lots of delicious ways to cook with the season’s best produce:

- *Eat Greens: Seasonal Recipes to Enjoy in Abundance* by Barbara Scott-Goodman and Liz Trovato (www.runningpress.com)
- *The Complete Kitchen Garden: An Inspired Collection of Garden Designs & 100 Seasonal Recipes* by Ellen Ecker Ogden (www.stcbooks.com)
- *The Old Farmer’s Almanac Garden-Fresh Cookbook* (www.almanac.com)

