

Vegetarian Diet

In recent years, many people have turned to vegetarianism for a variety of reasons. Whether it be for religious, moral, environmental or health reasons, vegetarian diets are definitely gaining popularity.

There are varying degrees of vegetarianism, from the very strict or total vegetarian to the semi-vegetarian. A total vegetarian (i.e. vegan) excludes all animal foods and consumes only plant foods such as grains, dried bean and peas, fruits, vegetables, nuts and seeds. A semi-vegetarian may include eggs, dairy products and occasional meat, fish, or poultry.

Studies have shown that vegetarians tend to have lower blood cholesterol levels and blood pressures, less digestive and weight problems, and lower risk of heart disease, diabetes, and some forms of cancer.

If you decide to follow a vegetarian diet, particularly a strict vegetarian diet, please consult your physician and have a registered dietitian assist you in meal planning. This will ensure that your diet is well balanced and nutritionally adequate. This is especially important for pregnant and breast-feeding women, children, and teenagers. With proper planning, vegetarian diets can be healthful and nutritionally adequate. Here are some tips to help you adopt a healthy vegetarian diet:

- Plan meatless meals several times a week using dried beans and peas (e.g. blackeye peas, soybeans, black beans, etc.), soybean curd (tofu), egg whites, nuts, and gluten in place of meat.
- Reduce the amount of meat and increase the amount of vegetables in your favorite dishes.
- Base your diet on whole grain products such as brown rice, whole wheat bread, oatmeal etc.

- Select low fat or fat-free dairy products and limit egg yolks to no more than 4 per week.
- Eat plenty of fresh fruits and vegetables.
- Limit the use of deep fried foods.
- Limit amount of oil used in cooking and go easy on sugary foods.

Total vegetarians may run the risk of some potential vitamin and mineral deficiencies and may require a vitamin-mineral supplement. When planning a vegetarian diet, be sure to include adequate amount of the following nutrients:

Protein

Protein is the main building block for all body tissues. Animal foods such as meat, fish, poultry, eggs, and dairy products are “complete” protein because they contain all the essential building blocks (amino acids) needed for growth and repair. With the exception of soy protein, the proteins from plants foods are less complete because they lack one or more of the essential amino acids. These vegetable proteins need to be combined in a way so that they form a complete protein. For example, combining rice with beans or peanut butter with bread can form complete proteins similar to those found in meat. Luckily, vegetable protein foods do not have to be eaten at the same meal in order to result in a complete protein. The key is to eat a wide range of foods throughout the day.

Vitamin B12

Vitamin B12 is essential to the nervous system and the formation of red blood cells. This vitamin is found only in animal products and is absent in plant foods. Vegetarians who do not use eggs or dairy products should take a vitamin B12 supplement or choose food products fortified within this vitamin.

Vitamin B2

Vitamin B2 functions in the release of energy from food and maintenance of healthy skin, vision, and nervous system functions. Milk and eggs are rich in vitamin B2. Other sources include green leafy vegetables, whole grains, and enriched breads and cereals.

Calcium

Calcium is needed for the formation of strong bones and teeth, blood clotting, and functioning of the muscles and nerves. Dairy products are rich in calcium. Other sources of calcium include soybean curd (tofu) made with calcium sulfate, calcium fortified soymilk, dark green leafy vegetables, almonds, and seaweed.

Vitamin D

Vitamin D is necessary for the absorption of calcium. Lack of vitamin D can lead to softening of the bones (rickets). Milk products contain vitamin D. The body can also manufacture its own vitamin D when exposed regularly to sunlight.

Iron

Iron is important for the transportation of oxygen to the cells, and in the prevention of anemia. Iron in plant foods is not as well absorbed as those found in meats. Eating foods high in vitamin C such as citrus fruits (e.g. orange, tangerine, grapefruit, strawberries, and cantaloupe) at the same meal enhances the absorption of iron. Iron rich foods include whole grain products (e.g. whole wheat bread, brown rice, and oatmeal), dried beans and peas, dark green leafy vegetables, and dried fruits.

Zinc

Zinc is needed for wound healing and tissue repair. The best sources are from meat and seafood. Good sources of zinc include dried beans and peas, nuts, and seeds.

Even though vegetarians consume less calories, saturated fat, and cholesterol in general, those who eat eggs, whole milk, cheese, fried foods, and desserts can quickly exceed their intake of calories, saturated fat and cholesterol. Remember, unless you select foods low in fat and sugars, going on a vegetarian diet may not necessarily help you to lose weight or improve your health.