

Healthy Eating Guidelines for Vegans

A vegan diet includes grains, vegetables, fruit, legumes (dried beans, peas and lentils), seeds and nuts. It excludes meat, fish, poultry, dairy and eggs and products containing these foods.

A healthy vegan diet has many health benefits including lower rates of obesity, heart disease, high blood pressure, high blood cholesterol, type 2 diabetes and certain types of cancer.

It may take planning to get enough protein, iron, zinc, calcium, vitamins D and B12 and omega-3 fats from foods or supplements. A healthy vegan diet can meet all your nutrient needs at any stage of life including when you are pregnant, breastfeeding or for older adults.



Steps you can take

Follow Canada's Food Guide to plan your meals and snacks. This will help make sure that your diet is healthy, well balanced and includes all the following nutrients:

Protein

Protein is important for building and keeping muscles and red blood cells healthy. It supports growth all through the life cycle. Sources of protein include:

- | soy and soy products like tofu, tempeh and fortified soy beverages
- | meat alternatives like textured vegetable protein (TVP) and veggie burgers
- | dried beans (kidney, black and white beans), peas (chickpeas and black-eyed peas) and lentils (red, brown and green lentils)
- | grains (quinoa, brown rice, bulgur and oatmeal)
- | nuts, nut butters (hazelnuts and almond butter) and seeds (sesame and sunflower)
- | peanuts and peanut butter.

Iron

Iron helps carry oxygen to different parts of the body. Vegans need about twice as much dietary iron as non-vegetarians because the iron from plant foods (non-heme iron) isn't as well absorbed as the iron from animal foods (heme iron). To meet these needs, vegans should choose iron-rich foods daily. Good sources of non-heme iron include:

- | soy and soy products like firm or extra firm tofu, tempeh and fortified soy beverages
- | meat alternatives like textured vegetable protein (TVP) and veggie burgers
- | dried beans, peas and lentils like kidney, pinto and adzuki beans, chickpeas and black-eyed peas, and red, brown and green lentils
- | fortified grain products (breads, cereals, and pasta)
- | some nuts and seeds like cashews, almonds, pumpkin and sesame seeds
- | prune juice and dried apricots
- | vegetables like cooked spinach, kale and potatoes with their skins
- | black strap molasses.

Iron from vegetarian sources is better absorbed when eaten with vitamin-C rich foods. Examples of vitamin C-rich foods include oranges and grapefruit and their juices, lemons, limes, kiwis, mangos, cantaloupe, potatoes, sweet peppers, broccoli, snow peas and some green leafy vegetables.

Vitamin B12

Vitamin B12 is important for making red blood cells and helping the body use fats. Good sources of vitamin B12 include:

- | Red Star nutritional yeast
- | fortified soy beverages and other fortified non-dairy beverages like rice and almond beverage
- | fortified meat alternatives like TVP, veggie burgers and meatless chicken, fish and meatballs.

Vitamin D

Vitamin D helps the body to absorb and use calcium and phosphorus for strong bones and teeth. Good sources of vitamin D include:

- | fortified soy beverages and other fortified non-dairy beverages like rice and almond beverage
- | non-hydrogenated margarines.

Calcium

Calcium helps bones to grow and stay healthy. It also helps muscles to contract, including making the heart beat. Good sources of calcium include:

- | soy yogurt, fortified soy beverages and other fortified non-dairy beverages like rice and almond beverage
- | soybeans, navy beans, white beans and tofu prepared with calcium sulfate
- | almonds
- | sesame butter (tahini)
- | blackstrap molasses
- | some vegetables, such as bok choy, okra, collard greens and turnip greens
- | some fruit, like figs and fortified orange juice.

Zinc

Zinc is needed for growth and development. It also helps strengthen the immune system and heal wounds. Good sources of zinc include:

- | soy and soy products like tofu, tempeh and fortified soy beverages
- | dried beans, peas and lentils
- | some nuts like pecans and cashews and their butters like cashew butter
- | peanuts and peanut butter
- | pumpkin seeds and sesame seed butter (tahini)
- | whole grains and fortified cereals.

Linolenic acid (omega-3 fat)

Omega-3 fats are important for eye, nerve and brain development and are helpful in preventing heart disease. Good sources of omega-3 fats include:

- | oils like canola, flaxseed, walnut and soybean
- | ground flaxseed
- | soybeans, tofu and walnuts.

Special Considerations

Pregnant and breastfeeding women

Pregnant (including those planning to become pregnant) and breastfeeding women should follow Canada's Food Guide, with special attention to the nutrients above. If you are concerned that you are not getting enough of any nutrient, speak with your doctor or a dietitian.

All pregnant women should take a prenatal supplement that contains 400 micrograms (mcg) folate and 16-20 milligrams (mg) of iron. The supplement should also contain vitamin B12.

Older adults

If you are over the age of 50, it is important to get enough vitamin D, vitamin B12 and calcium. As you get older, your body absorbs vitamin D and vitamin B12 less effectively. For this reason, Canada's Food Guide states that you should take a vitamin D supplement of 400 IU each day. You should also get vitamin B12 from fortified foods (fortified soy products) or a supplement. Include three servings of milk alternatives each day to help meet your calcium needs. A daily multivitamin-mineral supplement will help meet these needs.



Additional Resources

- | "Eating Well with Canada's Food Guide"
www.healthcanada.gc.ca/foodguide
- | *Becoming Vegan: The complete guide to adopting a healthy plant-based diet*, by Brenda Davis, R.D. and Vesanto Melina, M.S., R.D.
- | For nutrition answers, recipes, meal plans and vegetarian info visit:
The Vegetarian Resource Group at www.vrg.org.
- | For hundreds of vegan and vegetarian recipes:
<http://vegweb.com/recipes>

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Notes

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