



Healthy Vegetarian Diet

A properly planned and varied vegetarian diet can offer health benefits. For example, observation of populations across Europe indicates that high intakes of vegetables and fruits are associated with a lower incidence of cardiovascular disease, cataract and some cancers. However, when deciding to become vegetarian, it is not enough just to exclude meat from the diet. Care needs to be taken that the essential nutrients normally provided by meat and those from plant foods replace other animal foods.

Here is some simple advice that will help to plan a balanced diet:

- ▶ Mix plant food sources at each meal to improve protein quality. For example, eat grains (e.g. wheat), which are poor in the essential amino acid lysine with legumes (peas, beans), which are lysine rich. Including egg or milk products with the meal will improve protein quality further.
- ▶ Try to consume some dairy products and margarine (poly- or mono-unsaturated) each day to supply vitamins A and D, calcium and essential fats. If you consume a lot of dairy products, fat intake can be reduced by choosing the many reduced-fat milks, cheeses, yoghurts and spreads on the market. Dairy products are also a useful source of zinc and vitamin B12. Including egg or milk products with a meal can also help to improve zinc absorption from the plant foods in that meal.
- ▶ To improve iron absorption eat vitamin C-rich fruits (e.g. blackcurrants, guava, oranges, grapefruit, kiwi fruit), or drink a large glass of fresh fruit juice, with each meal. The vitamin C helps you to absorb more iron from the meal. Drink tea away from the meal, as substances in tea can reduce iron absorption.
- ▶ Wholegrain cereals provide a rich source of B vitamins (other than B12) as well as being a good source of dietary fibre. Whole grains, however, also contain substances, which may interfere with the absorption of several essential minerals. For infants and young people who are rapidly growing, and during pregnancy, when requirements for minerals such as iron, zinc and calcium are higher, it is probably wiser to mix wholegrain products with more refined cereals, e.g. eat both white and wholemeal bread, rice and pasta dishes.
- ▶ Phytic acid is one substance found in wholegrains, which can reduce mineral absorption. Phytic acid is broken down by yeast, so that when bread is leavened by yeast the phytic acid is largely destroyed. It is much better, therefore, to eat wholemeal bread as a good fibre source rather than sprinkle unprocessed wheat bran onto food. The unprocessed bran will contain much higher levels of phytic acid.

- ▶ Try to consume at least five portions of fruits and vegetables per day. Although potatoes are a useful source of several essential nutrients they don't count them as one of your vegetable servings but sweet potato is great and is low in G.I. so satisfy you longer. Always include a rainbow of colour in your daily fruits and vegetables as these all contain various vitamins and minerals needed for optimum health.

A typical weekly healthy eating plan for vegetarians can be found on week four of our Lifestyle plan.

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