

Vegetarian diets in children



For most well and healthy children a vegetarian diet can provide a healthy and nutritious alternative to a diet including meat.

Infant feeding

Particular attention is needed for vegetarian mothers that breast feed when infants may be at risk of vitamin and mineral deficiency.

Breast feeding mothers need an adequate diet with particular attention paid to Vitamin D, (margarine and butter, eggs, cheese), calcium (cow milk and fortified soy products) and iron (fortified cereals, grains, legumes, green leafy vegetables) intakes. Vitamin B12 may need to be supplemented in vegan mothers.

What problems may occur with a vegetarian diet?

Areas of concern for vegetarian children include:

- Energy for growth,
- Providing an adequate iron intake,
- Identifying sources of vitamin B12,
- Obtaining enough vitamin D and calcium,
- Ensuring a plentiful supply of suitable fats,
- Having food in an appropriate form and combination to make sure nutrients can be digested and absorbed by the child.

What foods should I include?

For young children with high-energy needs, and smaller stomach capacity, it is important to find the balance between a diet high in fibre and foods that are higher in nutrient and energy density. This may mean including both unrefined and refined cereals particularly infant cereals such as infant rice cereal as well as high-energy additions to food such as full fat dairy products, nut butters and avocado.

There are different types of vegetarians, largely determined by the foods that the vegetarian does not eat, rather than the foods they do. The type of diet most commonly associated with significant nutritional problems in children is the vegan diet.

DEFINITION OF VEGETARIAN GROUPS

• VEGETARIAN TYPE	FOODS EXCLUDED	PROTEIN SOURCE
PARTIAL VEGETARIAN	Red meat, offal	poultry, fish, eggs milk, cheese, yoghurt beans, legumes, pulses, nuts
LACTO-OVO VEGETARIAN	Red meat Offal Fish, Poultry	milk, cheese, yoghurt eggs, beans, legumes, pulses nuts
LACTO-VEGETARIAN	Red meat Offal Poultry, fish, eggs	milk, cheese, yoghurt beans, legumes, pulses nuts
VEGAN	Red meat Offal Poultry, fish, eggs Milk, cheese, yoghurt	beans, legumes, pulses nuts; soy products eg tofu

Suitable beans and legumes may include:

- Baked beans
- Lentils
- Chick peas (hummus)
- Red kidney beans
- Lima beans
- Navy beans
- 3 bean mix
- Haricot beans

Practical hints for managing a vegetarian diet in children

For any family considering a change to a vegetarian diet, or wanting to bring up a child following a vegetarian eating pattern, it is important to

- Understand what foods need to be substituted in the diet,
- Don't delay introduction of solids,
- Include infant rice cereal, fruits and vegetables (consider continuing with fortified rice cereal for longer) as first solids,
- After 6 months include soft, cooked beans, lentils and pulses, tofu, yoghurt, cheese, egg, avocado, smooth peanut and other nut pastes or sesame seed paste.
- Continue breast-feeding or fortified infant formula until at least 12 months.
- Encourage a variety of foods,
- Alternate wholegrain and refined cereal products,
- Combine lower energy vegetarian foods such as vegetables with higher fat foods,
- Increase energy of food by the use of nut butters, avocado, full fat dairy products and fat spreads and oil,
- Encourage regular meals and snacks,
- Include vitamin C containing food with non-meat iron sources eg an orange with baked beans on toast,
- See a health professional for advice about managing a nutritious diet or about supplements if concerned.

Links

Dietary Guidelines for Children and Adolescents www.nhmrc.gov.au/publications/pdf/n34.pdf