

# Healthy Eating for Vegetarians





*People choose to become vegetarians for a number of reasons – ranging from family and peer pressure, to concerns about animal welfare, the*

*environment and recent food safety scares – but a growing number are making the switch because of the health benefits of giving up meat and animal products.*

*I am not a vegetarian myself but have long supported and encouraged patients of mine who have decided to give vegetarianism a try. Unfortunately vegetarianism remains surrounded by all sorts of myths and prejudices – many of them founded historically by a sceptical medical profession. Attitudes are changing rapidly as more and more evidence emerges showing the health benefits of giving up meat and animal products but, like all healthy diets, getting the most out of becoming a vegetarian requires a bit of research and planning, and there is no better place to turn to for advice than the Vegetarian Society.*

**Dr Mark Porter** MB BS DA DCH

## Vegetarian diets

There are over 2 million vegetarians in the United Kingdom, with thousands more changing their diet every week, and many millions more worldwide. It is widely recognised that a vegetarian diet is nutritionally adequate, and such a diet typically follows current healthy eating advice of including more fruit and vegetables together with starchy and high fibre foods in the diet, and reducing the amount of fat, especially saturated fat, consumed.

A vegetarian is someone living on a diet of grains, pulses, nuts, seeds, vegetables and fruits with or without the use of dairy products and eggs (preferably free range).

People become vegetarian for many reasons, perhaps because they object to the slaughter of animals for food, because of environmental concerns, for religious reasons or for health reasons.

**A vegetarian does not eat any meat, poultry, game, fish, shellfish or crustacea, or any slaughter by-products.**

Vegetarians generally eat dairy produce and eggs and as such are termed lacto-ovo vegetarians. Some vegetarians, known as lacto vegetarians, also avoid eggs, and others, known as vegans, consume no animal products at all.

## Benefits

A vegetarian diet can confer a wide range of health benefits. Research has shown vegetarians suffer less from obesity, coronary heart disease, high

blood pressure, type II diabetes, certain diet related cancers, diverticular disease, appendicitis, constipation and gallstones.

## Particular nutrients

You may have heard that although a vegetarian diet is higher in many beneficial nutrients than an omnivorous diet, notably anti-oxidants and fibre (or non starch polysaccharides), it may be more difficult to obtain sufficient amounts of a few nutrients commonly found in meat. This is simply not the case.

### ■ IRON

Iron deficiency is one of the most common nutritional problems in a typical British diet. Research shows vegetarians are no more prone to iron deficiency than meat-eaters, in fact only 14% of iron in the household food supply is obtained from meat and meat products. Iron is found in leafy green vegetables, pulses, wholemeal bread, dried fruit and pumpkin seeds. Including Vitamin C with a meal (such as a glass of orange juice) can increase the amount of iron absorbed by threefold. Tea can reduce the amount of iron absorbed.

### ■ VITAMIN B12

B12 should not be a concern for vegetarians consuming dairy products and eggs, however vegans should look out for fortified foods such as breakfast cereals and soya drinks, since B12 is not naturally found in plant foods.

### ■ CALCIUM

Again should not be a problem for vegetarians consuming dairy produce. It is also found in leafy green vegetables, almonds, sesame seeds, dried fruit, pulses and fortified soya drinks.

### ■ PROTEIN

Many years ago it was thought that since most vegetarian sources of protein do not contain all the eight essential amino acids in the right proportions it was necessary to combine different vegetarian sources at each meal to produce a “complete protein”. However it is now understood that since the body holds a short term pool of amino acids there is no need to worry about complementing amino acids all the time so long as the diet is a varied and well balanced one.

Good vegetarian sources of protein include beans, lentils, nuts, seeds, grains, soya products, dairy products and eggs.

### ■ FATTY ACIDS

The omega 3 essential fatty acids found in oily fish are also found in a slightly different form in vegetarian foods such as rapeseed oil, flax seeds and walnuts. Or if you wanted to take a supplement, you can buy them made from algae rather than fish livers.



The “eatwell plate” advice, illustrating how much of what you eat should come from each food group, given to the general population equally applies to vegetarians. A healthy diet includes plenty of fruit and vegetables and starchy foods, moderate amounts of alternatives to meat and fish, and moderate amounts of dairy produce or alternatives, and small amounts of foods containing fat and sugar.

The following advice need not be strictly adhered to every day, but as long as the general diet essentially follows the guidelines outlined a balanced and healthy diet should be achieved.

### **Fruit and vegetables**

Fresh, frozen, juiced, canned or dried fruit and vegetables. Supply in particular vitamins, minerals and fibre.

### **Alternatives to meat and fish, including eggs, beans and other non-dairy sources of protein**

Include a variety of pulses, nuts, seeds, eggs and other soya, mycoprotein and wheat proteins in the diet to ensure adequate intakes of protein, minerals and vitamins.



# the eatwell plate

## **Bread, rice, potatoes, pasta and other starchy foods**

Make these starchy foods the basis of most meals. Try to include wholemeal or wholegrain versions when possible. Avoid adding too much fat. Supply carbohydrates, fibre, protein and some vitamins and minerals.

## **Milk and dairy foods**

Good sources of calcium, protein and some vitamins. If avoiding dairy foods, choose fortified soya, rice or oat drinks or ensure other foods high in calcium are included.

## **Foods and drinks high in fat and/or sugar**

Although some fat is needed in the diet, eat these foods sparingly, and look out for low fat alternatives.

## Special needs

### ■ PREGNANCY

During pregnancy, women have increased nutritional requirements for energy, protein, folate, iron and vitamins A, C and D.

The increased energy and protein requirements are small and can be met without any major changes in food intake. If energy intake is reduced due to appetite changes or morning sickness, then a reduction in high fibre foods and an increase in energy and nutrient-dense foods may be appropriate. The extra vitamins needed are generally present at higher levels in vegetarian diets, with the exception of vitamin D. Both vegetarian and non vegetarian pregnant women may be advised to take supplementary vitamin D.

### ■ CHILDREN

Infants, children and adolescents can meet all of their nutritional requirements on a vegetarian diet, a fact recognised by the British Medical Association and the British Dietetic Association. Nutrient intakes for vegetarian children compare favourably with dietary recommendations providing that total fat intakes are not excessive and iron intakes are adequate. However a healthy adult diet is not necessarily appropriate for infants and young children under the age of five years. Diets low in fat and high in fibre are unsuitable for infants as their limited stomach capacity may be filled up before they are able to meet

their energy or nutrient needs. Infant diets need to include energy and nutrient-dense foods such as cereal products, mashed lentils, vegetable oils, bananas and avocados. Excessive intake of high fibre and watery foods should be avoided. Contact the Society for more detailed free information on weaning and feeding growing children healthily.

### ■ TEENAGERS

Teenagers do not need significantly different levels of any nutrients in their diet, though in the late teens slightly more energy and protein are required. However iron is particularly important for both males and females at this age, with girls' iron requirements increasing significantly once their periods start.

For further information on any specific areas of vegetarian nutrition such as infant diets or on any particular nutrients, or for details of scientific studies backing up the healthiness of such a diet please contact the Vegetarian Society.

If you would like further free copies of this leaflet, just contact the Vegetarian Society:

Tel: 0161 925 2000

email: [info@vegsoc.org](mailto:info@vegsoc.org)

## Become a member of the Vegetarian Society

The Vegetarian Society is a registered educational charity. We do not receive any government funding, so we rely on membership fees and donations to carry out our vital work.

Without your support we simply would not exist.

### ■ WITH YOUR HELP WE CAN:

- offer expert advice and provide free information
- campaign around animal welfare issues
- campaign to raise the profile of vegetarian issues
- distribute info packs to schools, colleges and community groups
- teach members of the public and chefs how to cook delicious vegetarian food
- work behind the scenes with the food industry to improve provision
- set standards for what is truly vegetarian

### ■ AS A MEMBER, YOU WILL RECEIVE:

- our glossy quarterly magazine, *The Vegetarian*, packed with news, features, recipes and more!
- our quarterly members' e-newsletter
- membership discounts to hundreds of veggie-friendly businesses across the UK
- access to our members' only telephone information service
- the opportunity to get in touch with contacts for local veggie information and to take part in volunteering and social events too

Join up to our Youth Clubs: the Twiggy Club is for members aged ten and under and Team Veggie is for members aged 11 to 16. All young supporters will receive their own welcome pack with a membership card and keyring with the club's logo, cookery booklet and stickers. Twiggy Club members will also receive the exclusive Twiggy newsletter and Activity Booklet, while our older members will receive a quarterly issue of *The Vegetarian*, poster and Team Veggie e-newsletter

To become a member please call us on 0161 925 2000  
or email [members@vegsoc.org](mailto:members@vegsoc.org).

You can also buy or renew your membership online.  
Simply visit [www.vegsoc.org/members](http://www.vegsoc.org/members) and follow the simple directions.

## **The Vegetarian Society**

promoting understanding and respect for vegetarian lifestyles



The Vegetarian Society,  
Parkdale, Dunham Road, Altrincham, Cheshire WA14 4QG  
Tel: 0161 925 2000 Fax: 0161 926 9182  
Email: [info@vegsoc.org](mailto:info@vegsoc.org) website: [www.vegsoc.org](http://www.vegsoc.org)

Patrons: Rose Elliot MBE Jerome Flynn Sir Paul McCartney Stella McCartney Wendy Turner Webster

Reg charity number 259358