

Health Tip: Vegetarian Nutrition

Vegetarian diets are increasing in the United States for a variety of reasons. Many people become vegetarian overnight, while others make the change gradually. Well-planned vegetarian diets are appropriate for individuals during all stages of the life-cycle.

The American Dietetic Association considers properly planned vegetarian diets to be healthful and nutritionally adequate and may help to prevent and treat certain diseases. Vegetarian diets are often associated with lower blood cholesterol levels, lower risk of heart disease, lower blood pressure levels, and lower risk of hypertension and type 2 diabetes. Research has also shown that vegetarians are about 40 percent less likely to develop cancer compared to meat-eaters.

A vegetarian diet is defined as one that does not include meat (including fowl) or seafood, or products containing those foods. Generally there are four different types of vegetarians:

1. Strict vegetarian or vegan: excludes all animal products including eggs and dairy
2. Lactovegetarian: excludes meat, poultry, fish and eggs but includes dairy products
3. Lacto-ovovegetarian: excludes meat, poultry and fish but includes eggs and dairy products. Most vegetarians in the United States fall into this category.
4. Flexitarian: focus on vegetarian food with occasional meat consumption

People who follow vegetarian diets can get all the nutrients they need. The following are nutrients that vegetarians should be attentive to including in their diets:

- **Calcium**, used for building and maintaining bones and teeth, can be obtained from green, leafy vegetables, such as spinach and collard greens and foods fortified with calcium. Calcium-fortified soy-based beverages can provide calcium in amounts similar to milk.
- **Protein** has many important functions in the body and is essential for growth and maintenance. Eat a variety of plant-based foods, such as nuts, peas, and tofu. Build meals around protein sources that are naturally low in fat, such as beans, lentils, and rice.
- **Iron** functions primarily as a carrier of oxygen in the blood. Iron sources for vegetarians include iron-fortified breakfast cereals, spinach, kidney beans, black-eyed peas, lentils, turnip greens, molasses, whole wheat breads, peas, and some dried fruits, like apricots and raisins.
- **Vitamin B12** can be obtained from fortified foods like breakfast cereals, soy-based beverages, veggie burgers, and nutritional yeast.
- **Zinc** is necessary for many biochemical reactions and also helps the immune system function properly. Sources of zinc include many types of beans (e.g., white beans, kidney beans, and chickpeas), zinc-fortified breakfast cereals, wheat germ, and pumpkin seeds.

For lactovegetarians and lacto-ovovegetarians, milk and eggs are a source of B12, Calcium, Protein and Zinc.

To learn more about a vegetarian lifestyle, check out the USDA *Vegetarian Nutrition Resource List* available online at: <http://www.nal.usda.gov/fnic/pubs/bibs/gen/vegetarian07.pdf>. If you are considering becoming vegetarian, meet with a registered dietitian to maximize the health advantages of your diet. Most healthy vegetarians do not need to take supplements although there may be exceptions.

We hope to share more on this topic in future Health Tips.

Sources: United States Department of Agriculture (www.mypyramid.gov), American Dietetic Association (www.eatright.org), and Washington and Shady Grove Adventist Hospitals. The Health Tip of the Week is for educational purposes only. For additional information, consult your physician. Please feel free to copy and distribute this health resource.