



Vegetarian Nutrition

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RDN Resources for Consumers:

Vegetarian Nutrition for Toddlers and Preschoolers

A well-balanced vegetarian diet supports healthy growth and development of toddlers and preschoolers.

Good Sources of Key Nutrients

These early years are key in the establishment of healthy eating habits that will last a lifetime. Vegetarian and vegan diets can provide all the nutrients needed by children at each stage of growth. A registered dietitian can help parents plan healthy meals and create positive eating habits for the whole family.

Energy Needs and Growth

At age one, weight gain slows and children often begin to eat less. Eating too many high fiber foods may cause children to feel full before they have eaten enough calories. A well-balanced vegetarian diet is often high in fiber, which can be found in fruits, vegetables, and whole-grains. Incorporating some refined grain products, 100% fruit juices, and peeled fruits and vegetables into a child's diet can help reduce fiber and increase caloric intake if needed.

To increase calories, include high nutrient, high calorie foods such as:

- Avocado
- Nuts/seeds and nut butters
- Dried fruits
- Vegetable oils
- Full-fat soy and dairy products
- Bean spreads (hummus)

Good Sources of Key Nutrients

Protein

- Grains
- Legumes (e.g. beans, lentils)
- Tofu, tempeh, edamame
- Plant-based meat analogues
- Nuts and nut butters
- Seeds and seed butters
- Dairy products
- Soy milk
- Eggs

Calcium

Tip: Calcium supplementation may be used to compensate for inadequate dietary intake.

- Fortified, unsweetened plant-based milk (e.g. soy, almond, hemp, cashew, pea, oat, rice, coconut)
- Fortified 100% orange juice
- Milk, yogurt, and cheese
- Green leafy vegetables (e.g. broccoli, kale, bok choy)
- Calcium-set tofu
- Almonds and almond butter
- Tahini
- Dried fruit (e.g. raisins, apricots, figs)

Iron

*Iron deficiency anemia is the most common childhood nutritional problem.

- Whole or enriched grains
- Dried fruits
- Fortified cereals
- Beans and legumes
- Green leafy vegetables

Tip: Include a source of vitamin C with meals to increase iron absorption.

Vitamin B12

- Fortified soy milk
- Some meat analogs

- Vitamin B12-fortified nutritional yeast
- Fortified ready-to-eat cereals
- Eggs
- Dairy products

Zinc

Tip: Citric acid intake may aid in zinc absorption.

- Whole-grain products
- Wheat germ
- Fortified cereals
- Tofu
- Nuts
- Beans
- Hard cheese
- Yeast leavened bread
- Fermented soy products (e.g. tempeh, miso)

Vitamin D

- Vitamin D fortified foods (e.g. cow's milk, soy milk or rice milk, orange juice, ready-to-eat cereals)
- Eggs
- Skin exposure to sunlight

Omega 3 Fatty Acids

Tip: An algae-derived omega 3 supplement may be used.

- Ground flax seeds
- Chia and hemp seeds
- Walnuts
- Canola, hemp, walnut, and flax oil

Iodine

*Processed foods and sea salt are not good sources of iodine.

- Iodized salt
- Sea vegetables (e.g. dulse, kelp)

Meal Planning Guidelines

Use these guidelines to create a well-balanced vegetarian diet. Guidelines show the minimum daily amounts for toddlers and preschoolers who typically require 1,000 to 1,400 calories per day. Children who need more calories for growth and activity should eat extra servings.

** Based on the MyPlate recommendations for 2-3 year old children.*

Food Group	Amount per day*	Example of Total Daily Amounts
Grains	3-5 oz	2 slices whole grain bread, 1 oz ready-to-eat cereal, ½ cup cooked quinoa
Vegetables	1-1.5 cups	½ cup mashed sweet potatoes, ½ cup tomato sauce, ½ cup sliced bell pepper
Fruits	1-1.5 cups	¼ cup applesauce, ½ cup blueberries, ½ cup apple slices
Protein	2-4 oz	1 oz canned beans, 1 oz tofu, 2 Tbsp almond butter
Milk	2-2.5 cups	1½ cups fortified soy milk, ½ cup yogurt, ¼ cup cheese

Choking Risks

Toddlers and preschoolers are at an increased risk of choking because of immature chewing and swallowing skills, fewer teeth, and unwillingness to take the time to carefully chew food. To minimize choking risk, the following foods should be avoided by toddlers or eaten by preschoolers only with supervision:



- Nuts, except when finely ground
- Nut butters by the spoonful
- Vegetarian hot dogs, unless sliced lengthwise and then crosswise
- Cherry tomatoes, unless halved or quartered
- Grapes, unless cut in half. Peeling may be needed for young toddlers.
- Raw cherries, unless pitted and sliced
- Raw celery and whole raw carrots
- Popcorn

Tips for Creating Healthy Eating Habits

- Offer a variety of foods, repeatedly. Children's likes and dislikes often change. It can take several introductions of a new food before kids try it or decide whether they like it.
- Make food fun by cutting it into shapes, adding

- color with fruits and vegetables, or serving finger foods.
- Set a good example. Let children see you eating healthy foods. Refrain from making negative comments about healthy foods you may dislike.
- Add vegetables, tofu, beans, or fruit to bulk up or change favorite recipes.
- Incorporate fruits, vegetables, and nuts into smoothies and baked goods like muffins, breads, or pancakes.
- Include children in meal planning, grocery shopping, cooking, and mealtime activities.
- Allow preschoolers to choose the portion of food that they want to eat through family-style serving.
- Do not force a child to eat or use food as a reward.
- Limit fruit juice to 4 to 6 ounces/day and choose 100% juices.

Resources

Feeding Vegan Kids by Reed Mangels, PhD, RD. <https://www.vrg.org/nutshell/kids.php>, 2009.

MyPlate Plan for Preschoolers by USDA. <https://www.choosemyplate.gov/myplate-plan-preschoolers>. Updated April 27, 2018. Accessed April 30, 2018.

Raising Vegetarian Children by Joanne Stepaniak, MEd. and Vesanto Melina, MS, RD. Contemporary Books, 2003.

Vegan Lunch Box by Jennifer McCann. Da Capo Press, 2008.

RDN Resources are a project of the Vegetarian Nutrition Dietetic Practice Group. More topics available at www.VegetarianNutrition.net. Professional resources also available for members at www.VNDPG.org.

A registered dietitian nutritionist can help you develop a healthy vegetarian eating plan that meets your needs. To find an RDN in your area, visit <https://vegetariannutrition.net/find-a-registered-dietitian/> © 2018 by VN DPG.

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