



FAQ: Plant-Based Diets

Sharon Palmer, an Oldways consulting dietitian, offers these up-to-date replies to popular questions and concerns about vegetarian and plant-based diets:

WHAT IS A PLANT-BASED DIET?

A plant-based diet is all about relying on plant foods — fruits, vegetables, whole grains, nuts, seeds, herbs, and spices — to fill all or most of your plate. There's more than one way to go:

- **Flexitarian or Semi-Vegetarian Diet** — Includes dairy foods, eggs, and small amounts of meat, fish, poultry, and seafood.
- **Pescatarian Diet** — Includes dairy foods, eggs, fish and seafood, but no other meat or poultry.
- **Vegetarian Diet** (also known as Lacto-Ovo Vegetarian) — Includes dairy foods, eggs, but no meat, poultry, fish or seafood.
- **Vegan Diet** — Includes no animal foods.



WHY SHOULD I CONSIDER A VEGETARIAN DIET?

Plant-based diets have been linked with many health benefits, including lower risk of heart disease, type 2 diabetes, and cancer. In addition, people on vegetarian and vegan diets weigh less than non-vegetarians. You can also reduce your carbon footprint by following a vegetarian or vegan diet. In fact, the Adventist Health Study 2 found that vegans have half the carbon footprint of non-vegetarians.

IS A VEGETARIAN OR VEGAN DIET NUTRITIONALLY ADEQUATE FOR EVERYONE?

The Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics reports that well-planned vegetarian and vegan diets are nutritionally adequate during all life stages — childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and older adulthood. In fact, research shows that these diets can offer many health advantages. The important thing is to plan your vegetarian or vegan diet in accordance with nutritional guidelines in order to meet your needs for all essential nutrients.

IS IT DIFFICULT TO GET ENOUGH PROTEIN ON A VEGETARIAN OR VEGAN DIET?

It's completely possible to meet your protein needs on a vegetarian or vegan diet. Most plant foods contain proteins — some are very rich in protein and contain amounts comparable to meat. For example, 1/2 cup of legumes such as beans, lentils or peas contains about 7g of protein — about the same amount of protein found in 1 ounce of lean meat, poultry, or fish. Nuts and seeds, including peanuts, walnuts, almonds, pistachios, sunflower seeds, hemp, chia, and flax also are good sources of protein. In addition, whole soy foods, including soy milk, tofu, edamame, and soy beans are very rich in protein. Grains and vegetables can contribute a good amount of protein to your diet as well. And if you consume eggs and dairy products, these foods contribute very high amounts of protein. It's essential to make sure that you include good sources of protein at each meal.



ARE VEGETARIANS DEFICIENT IN SOME NUTRIENTS?

A vegetarian or vegan diet can meet all of your nutritional needs, with a bit of thought. It's generally easy to meet your needs for protein, minerals, and vitamins on a vegetarian diet, which includes dairy and egg products and a variety of grains, legumes, vegetables, fruits, nuts and seeds. A vegan diet requires a little more planning in order to meet recommendations for certain nutrients, such as calcium, vitamin D, and vitamin B12. Calcium can be consumed in calcium-rich soy foods, leafy green vegetables, and other sources. Vitamin D can be obtained through exposure to the sun, as well as mushrooms exposed to sunlight, and from fortified foods. Vitamin B12, found in animal foods, must be supplemented in the diets of vegans. It's also important to remember that vegetarian diets are generally higher in vitamins, minerals and phytochemicals, compared with non-vegetarian diets.

DOESN'T A VEGETARIAN OR VEGAN DIET REQUIRE A LOT OF PLANNING AND PREPARATION?

A vegetarian or vegan diet can be very simple. It can include easy to prepare foods like whole grain breakfast cereals with milk or plant-based milk, sandwiches made with nut or seed butters, veggie burgers, tofu stir-fries, pasta dishes, whole grain side dishes, bean burritos, bean or lentil chilis or stews, and vegetable dishes. It has become very common to find vegetarian ingredients, such as legumes, whole grains, vegetables, fruits, nuts, seeds, non-dairy milk, and tofu at most supermarkets today.

AREN'T VEGETARIAN OR VEGAN DIETS BORING AND BLAND?

On the contrary — a vegetarian or vegan diet can be tasty, delicious, and satisfying. While meat choices are limited to a handful of varieties, such as beef, pork and chicken — there are literally thousands of plant foods that come in a variety of colors, textures, and flavors. There is no end to the combinations of flavorful foods that you can create with whole plant foods. When you prepare plant foods with healthy fats, including extra virgin olive oil and avocados, you further enhance the flavor of these foods.

I'D LIKE TO TRY A PLANT-BASED DIET. HOW DO I GET STARTED?

If you're considering a vegetarian diet, you might want to get started by going meatless once or twice a week to see how simple and delicious this eating style can be. It's simple to start out the day eating plants — just choose whole grains, nuts, seeds, beans, milk or plant-based milk products, fruits, and veggies in dishes like cereals, pancakes, omelets, and burritos. Choose a grilled vegetable salad or sandwich with soup for lunch. And try something creative for dinner, such as a tofu stir-fry, vegetable lasagna, or lentil stew paired with whole grains and a salad.