



Vegetarian Diets for Children

In recent years vegetarianism has grown in popularity. Vegetarian diets can meet all the recommendations for nutrients. The key is to consume a variety of foods and the right amount of foods to meet calorie needs. Vegetarian diets tend to be high in fiber and polyunsaturated fat, and low in cholesterol and calories. Children can be well nourished on a vegetarian diet, but extra care must be taken to guard against nutritional deficiencies.

Your child should consume a variety of foods from the 5 major food groups that make up the "food pyramid". Each food group supplies important nutrients, including vitamins and minerals. These 5 groups and typical minimum servings are:

Vegetables: 3 - 5 servings per day. A serving may consist of 1 cup of raw leafy vegetables, 3/4 cup of vegetable juice, or 1/2 cup of other vegetables, chopped raw or cooked.

Fruits: 2 - 4 servings per day. A serving may consist of 1/2 cup of sliced fruit, 3/4 cup of citrus juice, or a medium size whole fruit, like an apple, banana or pear.

Bread, cereal or pasta: 6 - 11 servings per day. Each serving should equal 1 slice of bread, 1/2 cup of rice or pasta, or 1 ounce of cereal.

Protein foods: 2 - 3 servings of 2 -3 ounces of cooked lean meat, poultry or fish per day. A serving in this group may also consist of 1/2 cup of cooked dry beans, one egg, or 2 TBSP of peanut butter for each ounce of lean meat. Other protein sources include soy products, nuts and seeds, nut butters, peas and certain grains.

Dairy Products: 4 servings per day of 1 cup of low-fat milk or yogurt, or 1 - 2 ounces of natural cheese.

It is most important to ensure adequate protein sources in a vegetarian diet. As a general guideline, protein intake should come from more than one source, each day. Combining cereal products (wheat, rice) with legumes (dry beans, soybeans, peas) when eaten together provide a higher quality mixture of amino acids than when eaten alone.

Also, because of the lack of meat products, vegetarians may have inadequate intake of iron, vitamin B-12 and zinc. Prepared foods fortified with iron and Vitamin B-12 may be encouraged. The absorption of iron from vegetables may be improved by offering your child citrus beverages at mealtime.

While calcium is present in some vegetables, your child may still need a calcium and vitamin-D supplement if dairy products are limited in the diet.

It is also important to ensure that the calorie content of the vegetarian diet is appropriate to support normal growth and weight gain. Regularly scheduled physical exams to monitor growth are essential. A multivitamin containing the Recommended Daily Allowance (RDA) of Iron and Vitamin B-12 is recommended in most cases, if dietary consumption cannot be ensured.