Well-planned vegetarian diets can meet the nutritional needs of infants, children and adolescents.

A vegetarian diet may lower a child’s risk of heart disease, obesity, type 2 diabetes and some forms of cancer.

**What is a vegetarian diet?**

A vegetarian diet is based mainly on plant foods such as fruit, vegetables, legumes, nuts, seeds, and grains.

In general, vegetarians do not eat meat or fish. Eggs and dairy products may or may not be included in the diet.

There are different types of vegetarian diets:

- **Vegan (strict vegetarian):** no animal products, eggs or dairy.
- **Lacto vegetarian:** no meat, poultry, fish or egg, but includes dairy products.
- **Lacto-ovovegetarian:** no meat, poultry or fish, but includes eggs and dairy products.

**How do I know that my vegetarian child is eating a safe, healthy, and balanced diet?**

**Calories and fat**

Vegetarian diets are sometimes low in fat but are often high in fiber, which can make a child feel full quicker. Nutritious foods with a higher fat content (e.g., nuts, seeds, dried fruits, avocado, and soy products) can be used to help a child meet their energy or calorie needs.

**Protein**

Protein needs can usually be met by providing a variety of plant foods. Foods high in protein include legumes (e.g., beans, lentils, dried peas), soy products, meat substitutes (e.g., Boca Burgers, soy hotdogs), nuts, seeds, eggs, and dairy products.

**Calcium**

Lacto vegetarians should get enough calcium from dairy products. Vegan children can get the calcium they need from dark green leafy vegetables, broccoli, beans, oranges, almonds, figs, tofu prepared with calcium (this will be listed on the package) and calcium-fortified beverages such as soy milk, rice milk, or orange juice.

**Iron**

Iron is the most common mineral deficiency in all children, not just vegetarian children. Good plant sources of iron include beans, dark green leafy vegetables, dried fruit, whole grains, blackstrap molasses, and iron fortified cereals. Vitamin C, found in fruits and vegetables, helps your child’s body absorb iron from these sources.

**Zinc**

Animal products are the best sources of zinc. The body absorbs animal sources of zinc better than plant sources. The best plant sources of zinc are nuts, seeds, legumes, wheat germ, and zinc-fortified foods (e.g., breakfast cereals, soy milk and veggie meats).
**Vitamin B-12**
Vitamin B-12 only comes from animal products. Getting in enough vitamin B-12 is not usually a problem for vegetarian children who drink milk, eat yogurt, and eat eggs. Vegan children should consume B-12 fortified soymilk, meat substitutes, and/or breakfast cereals. They may also take a vitamin B-12 supplement.

**Vitamin D**
The body can make its own vitamin D with regular safe exposure to sunlight. Eggs are the only vegetarian food naturally rich in vitamin D. Foods fortified with vitamin D include: cow’s milk, soy or rice milk, and some brands of orange juice (check labels). Because the vitamin D content of fortified foods may vary, safe sun exposure and vitamin D3 supplements are the best sources of vitamin D.

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**Daily Food Guide**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Food group</th>
<th>Suggested daily servings</th>
<th>Serving sizes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grains</td>
<td>6 or more servings</td>
<td>1 slice of bread&lt;br&gt;½ bun, bagel, or English muffin&lt;br&gt;½ cup cooked cereal, rice, or pasta&lt;br&gt;1 cup dry cereal (1 oz)&lt;br&gt;(Servings for toddlers may be half of this size.)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Vegetables</td>
<td>4 or more servings</td>
<td>½ cup cooked or 1 cup raw&lt;br&gt;(Servings for toddlers may be half of this size.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fruits</td>
<td>2 or more servings</td>
<td>1 piece fresh fruit&lt;br&gt;¾ cup fruit juice&lt;br&gt;½ cup canned fruit&lt;br&gt;(Servings for toddlers may be half of this size.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legumes (beans, lentils, dried peas), nuts, seeds, eggs, meat substitutes (see ideas listed below)</td>
<td>2-3 servings</td>
<td>½ cup cooked beans&lt;br&gt;4 ounces tofu or tempeh&lt;br&gt;2 Tablespoon nuts, seeds, or nut butter&lt;br&gt;3 ounce meat substitute&lt;br&gt;1 egg&lt;br&gt;(Servings for toddlers may be half of this size.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dairy products, fortified soy milk products</td>
<td>3 servings</td>
<td>1 cup milk or soy milk&lt;br&gt;1 cup yogurt or soy yogurt&lt;br&gt;1 ½ ounce cheese or soy cheese&lt;br&gt;2 ounces processed cheese&lt;br&gt;(Servings for toddlers may be half this size.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Healthy fats</td>
<td>2-3 servings</td>
<td>Canola, olive, safflower, walnut oil, flax seed oil, ground flax seed, wheat germ, avocado, olives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fats and sweets</td>
<td>Limit calories from these</td>
<td>Oil, margarine, cakes, cookies, candy, soda, fruit drinks</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Try these ideas for meat substitutes: (for a complete meal, just add one of these foods to a meal or snack that contains foods from the other food groups):

- Bean burritos or tacos
- Tofu (can be stir fried with vegetables and/or nuts)
- Hummus (i.e., Middle Eastern chickpea spread; serve with pita bread & vegetables for dipping)
- Veggie burger, veggie meatballs
- Veggie or tofu hot dog
- Veggie nuggets
- Tempeh (i.e., Indonesian soy product with meat-like texture)
- Lentils or beans with rice or couscous
- Bean soups or stews
- Nut spreads such as peanut or almond butter or tahini (i.e., sesame seed spread)

**Checklist for meal planning:**

- Choose a variety of foods including whole grains, fruits, vegetables, legumes, nuts, seeds, dairy or calcium-fortified soy products.
- Choose foods in their natural form more often than processed, sweetened and fatty foods. *
- If dairy products are used, offer whole milk until 2 years of age and then transition to 1% or skim milk by age 4. *
- Include a source of vitamin B-12 (especially for vegan children).
- If exposure to sunlight is limited, include several sources of vitamin D or discuss vitamin D supplements with your doctor or dietitian.
- Offer children several nutrition meals and snacks everyday to help meet their energy needs.

* A child with high energy needs may benefit from:
  - use of some refined grains (fortified breakfast cereals, pasta, breads) because they tend to be less filling than whole grain foods
  - use of foods higher in fat (e.g., whole milk, nuts, nut butters, seeds, avocado, or tofu)

A Registered Dietitian can help you plan a vegetarian diet to meet your child’s nutritional needs.
Resources on the Internet:

American Dietetic Association (ADA)
http://www.eatright.org

Position paper on vegetarian nutrition available by selecting “Position Papers”, then choosing “Vegetarian Diets” from index.

Vegetarian Nutrition
Food and Nutrition Information Center, USDA

Contains links to web resources.

Vegetarian Nutrition Resource List

Scroll down and, under General, select Vegetarian Nutrition Resource List 2008 (PDF).

The Vegetarian Resource Group
http://www.vrg.org

Comprehensive site provides information on nutrition, foods, surveys, and FAQs.

In a Vegetarian Kitchen with Nava Atlas
http://www.vegkitchen.com

Contains easy-to-follow recipes and cooking tips.

The Vegetarian Site
http://thevegetariansite.com/vegchild.htm

A link from Healthline, contains information adapted from sources such as The Vegetarian Resource Group and Physicians Committee for Social Responsibility.