

Vegetarian eating - Q & A

This fact sheet lists a range of questions and answers on vegetarian eating. The questions were posted by visitors to the Better Health Channel and answered by a panel of experts, which includes general practitioners, nutritionists, physical activity professionals and other health and medical specialists.

Q. I am a 36 year old female with iron deficiency anaemia. I am mostly vegetarian by choice. I have been advised to supplement my diet with liver, meat and so on but I don't want to eat red meat. My parents both have heart disease. What do you advise?

Iron deficiency is a common problem in women and choosing not to eat red meat does remove an important source of readily available iron in your diet. However, there are many plant foods you can eat to increase the amount of iron that you get each day.

Foods such as legumes (lentils, dried peas), dark green leafy vegetables, wholegrain breads and cereals, and iron fortified foods all contain good levels of iron. Try cooking them in a cast iron pot as a little of the iron from the pot can end up in the meal.

To help maximise the amount of iron you absorb from these foods, combine them with a glass of orange juice or a couple of pieces of fruit. Vitamin C has been shown to increase the absorption of iron.

Avoid drinking tea, coffee or red wine with a meal as the compounds in these drinks can help to reduce the amount of iron you absorb. However, if you have iron deficiency anaemia, you may need to take supplements of iron in order to boost your levels and use these dietary recommendations to avoid becoming deficient again.

Check with your doctor first as you should never self-medicate and you will need to have routine iron checks. If you have a family history of heart disease then following a well-balanced vegetarian diet can help to lower your risk of heart disease.

Q. My five year old daughter doesn't want to eat meat. It upsets her that the animals have been killed. Will it affect her growth if she doesn't eat meat? No one else in my family is vegetarian.

A well-balanced vegetarian diet can provide all the nutrients needed for growth for your daughter but you do need to be careful. Meat is an important source of protein and nutrients like iron and zinc. Instead of just removing it, you need to replace it with plant foods that also contain these nutrients.

When a meal doesn't contain meat, make sure there are beans or lentils of some type. Chilly beans on rice or lentil shepherd's pie are two examples of meals that contain good levels of protein, iron and zinc. Having some canned beans or frozen lentils readily available can shorten the time taken to make these meals.

Eggs and dairy products are also excellent sources of nutrition and can be made into a variety of dishes. Quiches can be frozen and easily reheated to replace the meat meal your family may be having. There are a number of health benefits of a vegetarian diet and having the whole family eat a vegetarian diet on three days a week may benefit the whole family. It would also make meal preparation easier for you. The Better Health Channel has excellent information on vegetarian eating and healthy diets for children and adults. Browse the Better Health Channel's extensive list of recipes for meals rich in iron, calcium and vitamins.

Q. I am vegetarian and feeling a little lethargic. Would iron help?

There are many causes of fatigue including:

- Poor sleep

- Stress
- High activity levels
- Poor carbohydrate intake
- Poor fluid intake
- Iron deficiency.

Taking iron supplements will only be useful if your iron stores are low. A blood test is required to assess iron stores. Speak to your doctor before using any iron supplement.

Q. What foods would provide an adequate protein intake for vegetarians and vegans?

Concern is often raised regarding the ability of a vegetarian or vegan diet to provide adequate protein to meet daily protein requirements. The Australian recommended daily intake (RDI) for protein varies depending on a person's weight, age and health but generally advises:

- 0.75g/kg (grams per kilogram of bodyweight) for women
- 0.84g/kg for men
- Around 1g/kg for pregnant and breastfeeding women, and for people over 70 years.

So, for example, a healthy 75kg adult male would need 63g of protein daily.

The needs of children and adolescents also vary according to their age and weight. A full list of recommendations for dietary protein is available from the Australian Nutrient Reference Values (NRVs) website.

Although research indicates that vegetarians often consume less protein than non-vegetarians, vegetarians can easily meet the RDI for protein. The other concern often raised is that plant food sources of protein contain low levels of one of the essential amino acids. However, a balanced selection of foods will provide all the necessary nutrients. Rich sources of protein in a vegetarian or vegan diet include:

- Wholegrain bread and cereal foods (such as breakfast cereal or pasta)
- Dairy or soy products
- Lentils, dried beans and peas (ready-to-use products are available)
- Tofu, tempeh, textured vegetable (or soy) protein, and ready-made nut, soy or wheat-derived alternatives.

Strict vegans are at risk of developing vitamin B12 deficiency, as this is not found in plant products, and they are advised to take a vitamin B12 supplement.

Q. My 14 year old daughter only eats chicken and fish. Is this okay or will the lack of red meat in her diet cause health problems?

With a few precautions, there should be no health problems with a diet that eliminates red meat.

- **Protein** - fish and poultry should provide sufficient protein in your daughter's diet, while dairy products will look after calcium needs.
- **B-vitamins** - this vitamin group is found almost exclusively in animal products, including milk, eggs and cheese, but also in many seafoods and some grains and cereals. Vegemite (and other similar spreads) have a good range of B-vitamins.
- **Iron** - enriched cereals, wholegrain products, dark leafy green vegetables, legumes (peas and beans) and prune juice are good sources of iron. To help your body absorb iron, eat (or drink) foods rich in vitamin C - such as strawberries, citrus fruits, tomatoes, cabbage and broccoli - at the same time you consume iron-containing foods. Calcium can block iron absorption, so avoid milk in combination with iron-rich foods (although it's perfectly fine to drink it later). If your daughter drinks tea or coffee, it is also wise to avoid these at meal times as they also block the absorption of iron.
- **Zinc** - good sources of zinc include whole grains, soy products, nuts and wheat germ.

The key to a healthy vegetarian diet, or any diet, is to enjoy a wide variety of foods. Since no single food provides all of the nutrients that your body needs, eating a wide variety helps ensure that you get the necessary nutrients and other substances that promote good health. The good news is that a diet low (or excluding) red meat will also be low in saturated fat - this will have a range of healthful effects.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- An accredited practising dietitian, contact the Dietitians Association of Australia
- Vegetarian Network Victoria Tel. 0500-834437

Want to know more?

Go to [More information](#) for support groups, related links and references.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

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