



RDN Resources for Professionals:

Vegetarian/Vegan Myths

Myth #1: A Plant-based Diet is Not Safe for a Growing Child

According to the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics Position Statement on Vegetarian Diets, “appropriately planned vegetarian diets, including total vegetarian or vegan diets, are healthful, nutritionally adequate, and may provide health benefits in the prevention and treatment of certain diseases. Well-planned vegetarian diets are appropriate for individuals during all stages of the life cycle, including pregnancy, lactation, infancy, childhood, adolescence, and for athletes.”¹ Consuming a variety of nutrient-dense plant foods provides all of the nutrients growing children need.

Children have small stomachs and may become full before they have eaten enough if they eat a typical high fiber vegetarian/vegan diet.²

Studies have found that vegetarian adolescents consume more nutrients, such as vitamins A and C, folate, fiber, and iron, than non-vegetarians.^{3,4} Vegetarian adolescents also consume fewer sweets, fast foods, and salty snacks and more fruits and vegetables compared to non-vegetarian adolescents.^{3,5} Key nutrients of concern for adolescent vegetarians include calcium, vitamin D, iron, zinc and vitamin B-12.¹

Myth #2: You Have to Only Eat Fake Meat

Being vegetarian does not mean you have to resort to only eating meat alternatives. While meat alternatives are becoming increasingly popular and can fit into a healthy diet, there are many whole, plant-based food options that are sure to please any palate. Looking for vegetarian recipe inspiration? Check out www.vegetariannutrition.net.

Myth #3: Going Vegetarian/Vegan means you have to give up most foods

This couldn't be further from the truth. While you won't be eating as many animal products, vegetarians and vegans have an enormous amount of nutrient-dense food options to choose from. Giving up animal products will allow you to explore new foods.

A vegan diet is typically rich in whole grains and grain products (brown rice, millet, barley, oats, whole wheat bread), a variety of fruits and vegetables, nuts, seeds, legumes (such as lentils, chickpeas, kidney beans, adzuki beans), soy foods (tofu, tempeh, miso), seitan, etc. A vegetarian diet will include those foods as well as dairy products and eggs.

Myth #4: It is Hard for a Vegetarian/Vegan to Eat Enough Protein

A plant-based diet can easily meet the recommendations for protein, as long as calorie intake is adequate and appropriate.^{6,7} Research shows that when a diet contains a variety of foods throughout the day, all essential amino acids will be present in the amino acid pool, thus strict protein combining is not necessary.⁸ Almost all foods contain some protein. Strong sources of plant-based protein include: legumes (lentils, beans), soy foods (tofu, tempeh, edamame), seitan (wheat meat), some non-dairy plant milks (such as soymilk or protein-fortified almond milks), soy yogurt, nuts, seeds, certain grains (eg: amaranth, oats, millet, quinoa), and some breads.

How much protein do vegetarians/vegans need?

The Recommended Dietary Allowance for protein is 0.8g pro/Kg of body weight (BW). Protein recommendations for vegans may be increased to account for the lower digestibility of some plant proteins, from 0.8g/kg BW to 1.0g/kg BW.⁹

Myth #5: The Only Rich Sources of Calcium for Bone Health Are Dairy Products

Calcium intakes of vegetarians is typically adequate and above recommend intakes. Calcium intakes of vegans tends to vary more widely and are more likely to not meet the calcium requirements. Special consideration should be taken for those aiming to reach their calcium goals on a vegan diet.⁷

Calcium needs can easily be met on a plant-based diet. Plant foods may provide additional advantages for bone health since they can be good sources of potassium, vitamin K, isoflavones (from soy) and other compounds believed to affect bone health.¹⁰ Registered dietitian nutritionists (RDNs) can help clients meet calcium needs by encouraging regular consumption of good calcium sources and, when necessary, low-dose calcium supplements.¹

Naturally occurring calcium-rich foods include: low-oxalate leafy green vegetables (collards, kale, mustard and turnip greens), broccoli, bok choy, calcium-set tofu, almonds, and blackstrap molasses.

Calcium-fortified foods include: many non-dairy beverages made from soy, rice, oats or almonds, certain types of juices, breakfast cereals, and fortified protein bars.

Calcium absorption is inhibited by oxalates in some vegetables such as Swiss chard, spinach and beet greens. However, calcium is very well absorbed—at rates about twice that from milk—from low-oxalate leafy green vegetables.¹¹

The recommended level of calcium for adults age 19 through 50 years is 1,000 mg per day. An intake of 1,200 mg of calcium is recommended for women age 51 years and older, and for men 70 years and older.¹²

Myth #6: Soy is Unsafe

Soy is a rich source of nutrients that has many health benefits, including plant chemicals known as

isoflavones. Isoflavones are commonly called phytoestrogens, which means “plant estrogens,” because they can bind to the same receptors in cells that bind the hormone estrogen.



Studies within Asia show that Asian women who consume higher amounts of isoflavone-rich soyfoods are less likely to have breast cancer compared to those who consume little soy. Studies suggest that as little as one serving of soy daily for children and/or teenagers, decreases breast cancer risk later in life by 25 to 50 percent.¹³

Soy isoflavones found in soy foods may also be helpful for other conditions protecting against certain cancers, relieving hot flashes, and helping to manage diabetes type 2 (DM2).^{1,14,15} According to the American Cancer Society “There is growing evidence that eating traditional soy foods such as tofu may lower the risk of cancers of the breast, prostate, or endometrium (lining of the uterus), and there is some evidence it may lower the risk of certain other cancers.”^{16,17} It is recommended to consume whole soy foods rather than ultra-processed soy foods or soy supplements.¹⁸

Myth #7: Vegan Diets Lack Essential Fatty Acids

Vegan diets are usually rich in omega-6 fatty acids, but tend to have lower levels of omega-3 fatty acids (n-3; Alpha-linolenic acid (ALA)), Eicosapentaenoic acid (EPA), and Docosahexaenoic acid (DHA).¹⁹

Omega 3 fatty acids, particularly EPA and DHA, are important for cardiovascular health, as well as eye and brain development.¹ It is important to prioritize plant-based sources of omega-3 fatty acids. These sources include flaxseeds, walnuts, canola and hemp oils, and soy.

References for this resource are available at <http://vndpg.org/resources>