

## Veganism

Veganism is a less commonly-practiced form of vegetarianism. A vegan does not consume any animal-derived foods or use animal products or byproducts, and eats only plant-based foods.

### Nutrition

According to the American Dietetic Association (ADA), appropriately-planned vegetarian and vegan diets can be healthful, nutritionally adequate and may provide health benefits in the prevention and treatment of certain diseases. Additionally, well-planned vegetarian and vegan diets may be appropriate for individuals during all stages of the life-cycle including:

- Pregnancy
- Lactation
- Infancy
- Childhood
- Adolescence
- Athletes.

Studies suggest that vegetarian and vegan diets may offer a number of advantages, including:

- Lower levels of total fat, saturated fat and cholesterol
- Higher levels of fiber, magnesium, potassium, folate and antioxidants.

As a result, the health benefits of a vegetarian and vegan diet may include the prevention of certain diseases, including:

- Heart disease
- Diabetes
- Some cancers.

However, it is important to note that any restrictive diet can make it more difficult to get all necessary nutrients. A vegan diet eliminates food sources of vitamin B12, which is found almost exclusively in animal products. A vegan diet also eliminates milk products, which are good sources of calcium and vitamin D.

Consult with a doctor before beginning any new diet plans to ensure all nutritional requirements are met. Vegans must find alternative sources for B12 and calcium, as well as vitamin D, protein, iron, zinc, vitamin K and occasionally riboflavin.

### Alternative Nutrition Sources

Vegetarians and vegans should make sure that they are consuming enough of the nutrients listed below.

**Calcium.** Everyone needs calcium for strong teeth and bones. Calcium is plentiful in:

- Dark green vegetables (spinach, bok choy, broccoli, collards, kale, turnip greens)
- Sesame seeds
- Almonds
- Red and white beans
- Soy foods
- Dried figs
- Blackstrap molasses
- Calcium-fortified foods, such as fruit juices and breakfast cereals.

**Iron.** Iron from plant sources is less easily absorbed than iron from meat. This lower bioavailability means that iron intake for vegetarians should be higher than the recommended daily allowance for non-vegetarians. Vegetarian food sources of iron include:

- Soy foods like soybeans, tempeh and tofu
- Legumes like lentils and chickpeas
- Fortified cereals.

Iron absorption is enhanced by vitamin C. Consuming iron at the same time as calcium can slow the absorption of iron, so it is important to avoid eating high-calcium foods immediately before or after consuming iron-rich foods.

**Omega-3 fatty acids.** The omega-3 fatty acids (DHA, EPA and ALA) are important for cardiovascular health and brain function. DHA and EPA are found in fish, eggs and algae. Vegans can get these essential fatty acids through a diet rich in alpha-linolenic acid (ALA), a plant-based omega-3 fatty acid. ALA is found in:

- Flaxseed
- Walnuts
- Canola oil
- Soy.

DHA from microalgae can be found in supplements and fortified foods.

**Protein.** Not getting enough protein is a concern when switching to a vegetarian or vegan diet. Protein needs can be met while following a vegan diet by consuming adequate calories and eating a variety of protein-rich plant foods including:

- Soy foods like soybeans, tempeh and tofu
- Legumes like lentils and chickpeas
- Nuts and seeds.

**Vitamin B12.** Vegans can get vitamin B12, which is needed to produce red blood cells and maintain normal nerve function, from:

- Enriched breakfast cereals
- Fortified soy products
- Nutritional yeast

- Supplements.

**Vitamin D.** Vitamin D helps our bodies absorb calcium and is synthesized by exposing skin to sunlight. Vitamin D deficiency can occur in individuals who do not spend a lot of time outside. Vitamin D is not found in most commonly eaten plant foods. The best dietary sources are fortified foods, such as:

- Soy milk
- Rice milk
- Orange juice
- Some cereals.

Be sure to read the package to ensure the product is fortified. Food packaging is typically marked as vitamin-fortified on the front of the container or on the Nutrition Facts label on the back or side of the container.

Vegans can also take vitamin D2 supplements, which are plant-derived. (Note: Vitamin D3 supplements are not vegan.)

**Zinc.** Zinc plays a role in many key body functions, including immune system response, so it is important to get enough of it. Vegans can get the daily allowance of zinc by eating:

- Nuts
- Legumes
- Miso and other soy products
- Pumpkin and sunflower seeds
- Tahini
- Wheat germ
- Whole-grain bread and cereals.

## Vegan-friendly Products

In addition to not eating meat, poultry, seafood, eggs or dairy, some vegans avoid using products made from animal sources, such as fur, leather and wool.

While those are obvious animal products, many animal byproducts are things that are not recognized as being from animals. These include:

- Gelatin (made using meat byproducts)
- Lanolin (made from wool)
- Rennet (an enzyme found in the stomach of calves, young goats, and lambs that is used in traditional cheese-making)
- Honey and beeswax (made by bees)
- Silk (made by silkworms)
- Shellac (the resinous secretion of the tiny lac insect)
- Cochineal (a red dye derived from the cochineal insect).

Vegans also avoid toothpaste with calcium extracted from animal bones. Similarly, soap made from animal fat is avoided.

Check the packaging to find if a product is vegan. Typically, products are marked “vegan” or “vegetarian” near the list of ingredients.

## Resources

- American Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics: [www.eatright.org](http://www.eatright.org)
- Nutrition.gov: [www.nutrition.gov](http://www.nutrition.gov)
- The Vegetarian Resource Group: [www.vrg.org](http://www.vrg.org)
- Vegan Action: [www.vegan.org](http://www.vegan.org)

Some content on this page was gathered from documents found on the website for the U.S. Food and Drug Administration: [www.fda.gov](http://www.fda.gov).

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