

# So you want to be a vegetarian...



## A Guide for Teenagers

Telling your family and friends you no longer eat meat or other animal foods can often lead to surprise, concern or even anger and other negative reactions. Chances are your loved ones have your best interests at heart, but you may end up feeling alone and wondering if you can stick with your decision.

Arming yourself with some basic information on how to follow a healthy vegetarian or vegan diet, and how to talk about your choices with people who do not share your convictions, can help you be successful!

## Common Pitfalls

There are several common mistakes that new vegetarians and vegans make. These mistakes can often lead to not feeling well or not being able to stick with the lifestyle. A little knowledge can help you avoid these trouble spots!

**Problem:** Cutting out foods you used to eat, without replacing them with new foods.

**Solution:** If you're not eating meat, be sure to choose beans, nuts, seeds and soy foods like tofu instead. If you're not drinking milk, an alternative like soy milk will provide the same good nutrients.

**Problem:** Skipping the vegetables.

**Solution:** Vegetarians who don't like vegetables can have a pretty limited diet, and may miss out on important nutrients. Don't be afraid to try new foods, and make sure you are getting enough by filling half your plate with veggies or choosing at least 5-9 servings of fruits and vegetables every day.

**Problem:** Eating mostly convenience or fast foods.

**Solution:** New vegetarians may not know what to eat, so they stick with easy and familiar foods like cheese pizza, French fries and spaghetti. Pick up a vegetarian cookbook (there are tons!) and try your hand at cooking or ask for your family's help.

**Problem:** Skipping meals or not eating enough.

**Solution:** Feeling hungry might be the quickest cause of giving up. It is important for all teens, no matter what they eat, to choose three meals a day, plus healthy snacks!

## "How will you get enough...?"

• **Protein:** Your body needs this for growth and repair, especially of muscle. Eat a variety of foods throughout the day and choose the following best sources at least 3 to 4 times every day.

- ½ cup tofu
- 1 veggie burger patty
- ½ cup beans, lentils or chick peas
- 1 ounce nuts or seeds
- 2 tablespoons peanut butter
- ¼ cup hummus
- 1 cup soy milk or 6-oz soy yogurt
- 1 egg (some vegetarians eat eggs, but vegans do not)

• **Calcium:** This mineral builds bones and is especially important in the teen years. You need at least 3 to 4 servings every day. Soy foods also count towards protein servings.

- 1 cup soy milk or 6-oz soy yogurt (check label for at least 30% DV)
- ½ cup tofu (check label for at least 10-15% DV, some has less)
- 1 cup fortified orange juice
- 1 cup cooked spinach or collard greens
- 1 cup milk or other dairy (vegetarians eat these foods, but vegans do not)

• **Iron:** This mineral is important for making blood cells. You may become anemic and feel weak or tired without enough iron.

- Plant foods high in protein like soy, nuts and beans also are good sources of iron
- Milk does NOT give you iron
- Other good sources include fortified breakfast cereals, dark green leafy vegetables like spinach, dried fruits and baked potatoes.
- Vitamin C helps your body absorb more iron. Combine foods high in vitamin C, such as oranges, strawberries, broccoli and bell peppers, with sources of iron.

• **Vitamin B-12:** This vitamin is only found in animal foods, so if you are vegan you need to have 2 servings of fortified foods (such as soy milk) every day or take a supplement.

• **Omega-3 fats:** This is a special kind of fat that your body can't make and is good for the heart and brain. If you do not eat fish, you can get them from 1 tablespoon ground flaxseed, ½ ounce walnuts or 1 tablespoon canola oil every day.

# How to talk to friends and family about being vegetarian

Your parents are likely concerned that you're not going to get enough nutrition, or maybe they just don't know what to feed you. Your friends may give you a hard time about eating different foods, or maybe they feel funny about eating a burger in front of you. You may feel very strongly about your reasons for being a vegetarian, whether it's because you care about animals, the environment or your own health, but no one else seems to get it. **What can you say to help them accept your choice?**

## Family

- Study up on the nutrients you need and what foods you need to eat to get them (see other side). If you show your parents you have put thought into it and plan to eat smart, you may put their fears to rest.
- Mention all the health benefits of a vegetarian diet. Vegetarians are less likely to be obese, and have lower blood cholesterol and blood pressure as well as less risk of developing heart disease, cancer or diabetes.
- Tell them you understand that cooking is more work if everyone in the family is not eating the same thing. Offer to help in the kitchen. Suggest ways to change family favorite recipes to make them vegetarian, and come up with new meal ideas. If they eat vegetarian meals now and then it will be better for their health too.

## Friends

- Don't be shy about what you are eating if it is different. Tell your friends what it is and that you like it, especially if they are curious. If watching them eat meat does bother you, don't let them know – if it is rude for them to give you a hard time, the same goes for you.
- Be firm about your choice and the reasons that are important to you. Ask them to respect your choice.
- Nothing wins people over like great food, so if you have a new favorite, share it!



## What is the deal with meat substitutes?

There are lots of products available that are designed to take the place of meat. From veggie burgers to soy hot dogs, and imitation deli meats or chicken nuggets there is a substitute for just about any animal product you could imagine. But are these foods good for you?

**The good news:** Meat substitutes are low in saturated fat, the kind of fat that is bad for your heart. Most are low in total fat and provide plenty of protein. They can also make it easier to switch to a vegetarian diet, because they tend to be quick and easy to prepare. It may help you to have some of these foods on hand for occasions when you might otherwise miss out, such as the family barbecue.

**The not-so-good news:** Like many similar meat products, such as hot dogs and deli meats, these are processed foods which are usually very high in salt.

**The bottom line:** Meat substitutes can be a part of a healthy diet, but they should not take the place of fresh, whole foods like veggies, fruits, beans, nuts and whole grains, which should be eaten every day.

## Resources for More information

- Vegetarian Resource Group: Nutrition Information for Vegetarian Kids, Teens and Families  
<http://www.vrg.org/family/kidsindex.htm>
- Vegetarian Nutrition Resource List  
<http://www.nal.usda.gov/fnic/pubs/bibs/gen/vegetarian.pdf>
- Veggie Teens: A Cookbook and Guide for Vegetarian Teenagers  
<http://www.veggieteenscookbook.com>