

Excerpt

Healthy Eating During Pregnancy

Your Guide to Eating Well and Staying Fit

Vegetarianism During Pregnancy

Like most people you probably grew up eating meat. Beef, pork, lamb, and chicken took center stage on the dinner plate, barely leaving room for starches and vegetables. Today more and more people are deciding that they no longer want to give meat a starring role in their diets. Instead, they build a diet around plant foods such as grains, fruits, vegetables, legumes, nuts, seeds, and soy foods. Some include eggs, milk, or fish; others shun animal products completely.

People embrace vegetarianism for many different reasons—to be healthier and reduce their risk of disease, to take a stand for the rights of animals, because they don't like the taste of meat, to help the environment, to avoid the hormones, antibiotics, and pesticide residues found in animals, because of religious beliefs, to protect themselves from animal-borne diseases such as mad cow disease, because they believe that humans are meant to eat plant food and not animal food, or to save money.

As many as 10 percent of American adults are vegetarian. However, many more—estimates range as high as 40 percent—are “flexitarians,” meaning they avoid meat sometimes and incorporate some vegetarian meals into their diets.

A properly planned vegetarian diet can meet all of a person's nutritional needs. But is a vegetarian diet safe during pregnancy? The answer is absolutely yes:

Babies born to well-nourished vegetarian moms are as healthy as babies born to well-nourished meat-eating moms. A vegetarian diet can be absolutely fine for you and your baby provided you get all of the calories and nutrients you need.

Before you run to the kitchen and toss out all of the meat, though, consider that it can be a little more difficult to plan a nutritious diet if you don't eat meat. It's even tougher if you eat no animal products at all. That's not to say that it can't be done. But it requires extra planning, particularly when it comes to certain nutrients, such as protein, calcium, vitamin D, vitamin B12, zinc, riboflavin, iron, and omega-3 fatty acids. Also, if you're a vegan, you should take steps to ensure that you are getting enough calories.

Remember, too, that there is such a thing as a poor vegetarian diet. Think about it – if your breakfast is a refined-flour bagel with cream cheese and coffee, your lunch is pizza with a side of greasy French fries and a big sugary soda, and your dinner is packaged macaroni and cheese and a hot-fudge sundae, you're not eating any meat. But you're not getting many nutrients, either. There are plenty of junk foods that can be called vegetarian, including chips, french fries, soda, white bread, candy, cake, and sugary fruit juices. Avoiding meat doesn't automatically make your diet healthy. You have to make nutritious substitutions in place of the meat and add plenty of fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and legumes to your diet. A poorly planned vegetarian diet can be far less nutritious than a well-planned diet that includes meat products.

You can make your vegetarian diet even healthier by keeping your intake of sweets and high-fat foods in check (unless you are eating healthy oils to gain weight), choosing whole grains rather than refined grains, eating a wide variety of foods, and, if you eat dairy products, choosing low-fat varieties.

All pregnant women should take prenatal vitamins, but it's even more important for vegetarians. A prenatal vitamin offers a little extra insurance that you'll get enough vitamins and minerals, particularly those that are found primarily in animal foods.

What the rest of us can learn from vegetarians

On average, vegetarians tend to be healthier than meat eaters. Vegetarians have lower rates of obesity, heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, and some forms of cancer. (Researchers aren't sure whether vegetarians are healthier because they don't eat meat or because they tend to take better care of themselves in other ways, such as by exercising and not smoking.) Vegetarians tend to eat more fiber, vitamins, minerals, and cancer-fighting antioxidants, and fewer artery-clogging fats and cholesterol.

You can receive some of the nutritional benefits of vegetarianism without shunning animal foods completely. Here are a dozen lessons that meat-eaters can learn from vegetarians:

- Soy is a nutritious, flexible food that can be a delicious meat and dairy replacer. It comes in a variety of forms. (See page X).
- There's a world of grains that most meat eaters have never heard of, let alone cooked. Push aside the white rice and try bulgur, quinoa, pearl barley, and brown rice. Serve them with meals or toss them into salads for a chewy, nutty taste. They're an excellent source of fiber, iron, and B vitamins.
- Nuts aren't just for cocktail parties. Nuts contain heart-healthy oils as well as fiber and vitamins. Go beyond peanuts, though, and try cashews, almonds,

pecans, hazelnuts, macadamias, pistachios, and soy nuts. Experiment with nut butters, too.

- Soup doesn't have to come from a can—and it doesn't have to contain chicken and noodles. Soup is a great way to combine vegetables, legumes, and grains in a healthy, hearty meal. You can whip up your own homemade vegetable soup by simmering chopped vegetables (carrots, onions, garlic, celery, cabbage, green beans, chopped tomatoes, or whatever you have on hand) in a saucepan with canned vegetable broth and canned tomato sauce (choose low-salt varieties.) After the vegetables are tender, add some canned beans, cooked grains or pasta, and you'll have a fabulous main-dish soup in less than half an hour.
- Olive oil is better than butter. Even if you eat meat, switching from butter to olive oil or trans fat-free olive oil margarines is good for your heart.
- Vegetables can be the star of the meal. Who needs a hunk of beef when there's a spicy veggie stir-fry or luscious vegetarian lasagna on the menu?
- Veggie burgers taste good. Years ago they were nothing special, but today's veggie burgers are delicious. Grill them and serve them on whole-wheat hamburger buns with fixins! (sliced red onion, romaine lettuce, ketchup, sliced tomatoes) on the side.
- You don't need iceberg lettuce for a salad. Your salads will be much more nutritious (and tasty) with greens such as spinach, romaine, Belgian endive, chicory, arugula, watercress, dandelion greens, radicchio, and mizuna.
- There's more to leafy-green vegetables than spinach. Add variety and nutrients with greens such as bok choy, turnip greens, collard greens, kale, and okra.
- Beans are nutritional powerhouses. Add them to soups, salads, chili, and stew, or eat them plain.

- Pumpkin seeds aren't just for Halloween. Pumpkin seeds – along with sesame seeds, sunflower seeds, and flax seeds – are a rich source of nutrients. Toast them for the best flavor, and munch on them for snacks or add them to salads and trail mix.