

## *I recently became a vegetarian. Is it possible to get all the nutrients I need on a vegetarian diet?*



**Yes! Vegetarian eating is a healthy approach to eating, provided you choose well. There are many different kinds of vegetarian eating styles. Regardless of the type of vegetarian diet you follow, the foods you enjoy each day will impact how healthy your diet is. Like any other style of eating, the nutrients you take in depend upon the food choices you make. Knowing this, plan to choose a wide variety of nutritious foods each day.**

### **Follow the Food Guide**

Canada's **Food Guide** is a user-friendly tool that both vegetarians and non-vegetarians can use to plan a healthy, balanced diet.

The Food Guide can be used to plan vegetarian diets for children, teens, adults, and pregnant or breastfeeding women. The Guide provides advice on how many servings from each of the four food groups people of different ages. The Guide also recognizes that men and women have different nutritional needs.

The Food Guide's recommendations for the kinds and amounts of **vegetables and fruit and grain products** apply to all healthy Canadians over the age of two. In addition, the Guide offers advice on choosing **milk alternatives**, such as fortified soy beverages, for those who do not choose milk. Recommendations for choosing **meat alternatives** are also included in the Guide to help meet the needs of those people who do

not include meat, fish, poultry or eggs in their eating plan.

### **Fill in the Potential Gaps**

Consistency is critical when it comes to planning a healthy vegetarian diet. Be sure to achieve the **Food Guide recommendations** for all food groups each day. Pay special attention to foods that provide the following nutrients, which can be lacking in a poorly planned vegetarian diet:

#### **Protein**

Protein helps to build and maintain the body. Eggs, as well as milk and milk products (yogurt, cheeses) are all excellent sources of protein. Plant sources of protein include legumes (e.g. split peas, dried beans, lentils and soy foods), as well as nuts and seeds. Vegetables and whole grains also provide protein, but in smaller amounts.

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## Iron and Zinc

Iron and zinc are minerals that are essential for good health. Eggs are a good source of both these nutrients. Vegetarian sources of iron include: dried fruits (e.g. raisins), whole grains, nuts, green leafy vegetables, seeds and legumes. The body does not use the iron found in plant foods very efficiently. Because of this, it is important for vegetarians to make sure they choose a variety of iron containing foods each day. In addition, choosing a food rich in vitamin C – such as orange juice or broccoli – can help the iron found in plant foods be better absorbed by the body. Like iron, zinc is also found in whole grains, nuts and legumes.

## Calcium and Vitamin D

Calcium and vitamin D are needed for bone health. Cow's milk is rich in both calcium and vitamin D. Fortified soy and rice beverages are the most reliable vegetarian sources of these nutrients. Other foods – such as broccoli, almonds, and molasses – contain calcium but the amount is quite small. Vitamin D is not found in abundance in plant foods except fortified soy and rice beverages. Although sunlight is often touted as a good source of vitamin D, it's important to recognize that this is not the case for people living at northern latitudes like Canada. Changes in the length of the sun's rays mean that our bodies cannot make adequate

amounts of vitamin D from sunlight between the months of October and April. Choosing foods that are rich in vitamin D is a more reliable way to ensure that you get enough of this essential nutrient.

## Vitamin B12

Vitamin B12 plays an important role in the creation of blood and in nervous system health. Milk products and eggs are good sources of vitamin B12. Few plant-based foods contain significant amounts of B12 and the only reliable vegetarian sources are foods fortified with B12 (including some soy products and soy beverages, and some breakfast cereals) and B12 supplements.

Vegetarian eating has been linked to a reduced risk for:

- Obesity,
- Heart disease, and
- Certain types of cancer.

By choosing well, you can reap these potential benefits and savour the great taste that vegetarian foods offer.