



Types of Vegetarian Diets

The food preferences of the children and families you care for will vary and many children come from families who eat vegetarian diets. A vegetarian diet can provide all the nutrients necessary for a child’s growth and development, but careful planning is key when food groups are excluded. Like all children, those on a vegetarian diet need enough food variety and energy—in the form of calories—to fuel their rapid growth and provide for their high nutrient needs.

Children who are vegetarian need foods high in concentrated sources of calories, iron, protein, vitamins and minerals. You should therefore include foods such as cooked legumes (beans, peas, and lentils), whole grain breads and pastas, enriched cereals, nuts, seeds, soy and/or dairy products, dried fruit and eggs. Many common foods such as rice, greens, potatoes and corn also add to protein intake.

Vegan diets

Children on vegetarian diets that exclude eggs and dairy products (vegan diet) may be lacking in essential nutrients such as calories, proteins, fats, vitamins A, D, and B12, and the minerals iron, zinc, and calcium. Carefully planned vegan diets can satisfy nutrient needs for young children and promote normal growth but the family needs to work closely with their health care provider and a pediatric nutrition specialist as vitamin and mineral supplementation may be recommended for young children whose diets may not provide adequate nutrients.

Note that meals for children consuming vegan diets, which also omit milk, cannot meet the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) Meal Pattern requirements for breakfast, lunch and supper. They are not eligible for CACFP reimbursement, unless the center is able to obtain a special diet statement from a health care provider, which recommends rice or soy milk as a substitute for medical reasons. Children whose families choose a vegan diet for other reasons are not eligible to participate in the CACFP.

Low-fat diets are not suitable for young children, as a diet low in fat may not provide adequate energy intake. For children 5 years and older there should be a gradual reduction in fat, particularly saturated fat.

Macrobiotic diets are NOT recommended for young children.

Note: Children who are vegetarian may require more frequent meals and planned snacks than the Child Care Food Program (CCFP) meal schedule recommends.

Meal planning tips for vegetarian children

- Satisfy children’s sweet tooth naturally with ripe bananas, sweet potatoes, winter squash and dried fruit. Try offering a fruit ambrosia salad made with sliced bananas, cubed steamed sweet potatoes and a sprinkling of chopped dates or dried apricots.

Types of Vegetarian Diets	Beef & Pork	Fish & Chicken	Milk & Milk Products	Eggs	Vegetables, Fruit, Breads, Cereals & Nuts
Semi-vegetarian		*	*	*	*
Lacto-ovo-vegetarian			*	*	*
Ovo-vegetarian				*	*
Lacto-vegetarian			*		*
Vegan (only food from plant sources)					*

- Calcium, Vitamin D, and Vitamin B12 are very important for growing bones and teeth. To help children obtain these nutrients, use dairy products (cheese, yogurt, milk), soy or rice milks (be sure non-dairy milk alternatives are fortified with calcium and vitamins D and B12), calcium-fortified fruit juices and tofu. Dark leafy greens such as kale, bok choy and collard/mustard greens are also good sources of calcium.
- To ensure satisfactory iron intake offer good sources of vitamin C, such as tomatoes, broccoli, melons and citrus fruits.
- Good meat substitutes are beans, tofu, nuts, smooth nut and seed butters and eggs.
- Combining legumes, seeds and/or nuts with grains provides “complete” proteins. For example:
 - Pinto, red or black beans and rice
 - Peanut butter on whole wheat bread
 - Chili beans and cornbread
 - Soybean and rice casserole
- Butter, cheese, avocados and olive oil in moderation will provide additional fat in the diet.

Children may be allergic to nuts and nut butters, so watch them carefully for signs of an allergic reaction. Nut butters should only be given to children over 1 year of age, and only with supervision. Whole nuts are a choking hazard and should never be given to a child under 3 years of age.

- Set a good example and participate in the mealtime with the children. Let them see you eating healthy foods and modeling appropriate mealtime behavior.
- Involve children in food preparation. Even young toddlers can tear lettuce and help put cut-up vegetables into a pot.
- Some children may prefer eating single foods in separate bowls rather than a mixture of foods such as a casserole.

It can be fun and interesting to work with parents on meeting their child’s nutritional needs. With proper planning, it isn’t difficult to provide a child with a nutritious, well-balanced vegetarian diet. The healthy habits developed at a young age about foods and eating can last a lifetime.

References

NSFMI Mealtime Memo for Child Care, Number 3, 2010, *Accommodating Vegetarian Diets* available online at <https://theicn.org/documentlibraryfiles/PDF/20120713022055.pdf>

Meals without Squeals, Child Care Feeding Guide and Cookbook, 1997, Christine Berman, MPH, RD and Jacki Fromer.

Kids Health, (2021) *Vegetarian Diets* available online at <https://kidshealth.org/en/parents/vegetarianism.html>

Additional mealtime tips

- Offer choices of foods. Letting children make their own decisions can increase acceptance of different foods.
- Offer a variety of foods repeatedly because children’s food preferences often change—the food they refuse today may become tomorrow’s favorite. Studies show that a new food can be offered up to 15 to 20 times before a child will try it.
- Keep mealtime a pleasant time. Do not force a child to eat or use food as a reward and try to remain low-key about food refusals.