

# Vegetarian Diet and Eating Disorders



## What is a Vegetarian Diet?

A vegetarian diet involves abstaining from the consumption of meat (e.g., red meat, poultry, and seafood). There are a number of variations of this way of eating - some vegetarians will choose to eat fish, while others follow a vegan diet, and choose not to eat any animal products including eggs, dairy products, honey etc.

## Why Do People Adopt a Vegetarian Diet?

People may choose to adopt a vegetarian way of eating for one/several/all of the following the reasons:

- Parental preferences
- Religious or other beliefs
- Health or dietary concerns
- Taste preference
- Ecological concerns
- Rejection of the commodity status of animals
- Weight and shape concerns



## Vegetarian Diet and Eating Disorders

Sometimes people describe an aversion to meat, and feel unable to eat meat products. However, it is important for you to consider this reaction carefully and think about your reasons for choosing to eat in this way. You may find that you have been using an aversion for meat to avoid eating certain foods. If this is the case, it is important for you to discuss this with your therapist. If you're unsure, it may be helpful to ask yourself whether you started excluding meat before or after the onset of your eating disorder? Alternatively, you may find that you do stand by the values of vegetarianism, and if this is the case, then it will be important for you to consider how you manage your food intake to ensure a balanced diet.

\*Note: It may be necessary to suspend a vegetarian diet for the duration of treatment for an eating disorder, in order to facilitate recovery.

## Vegetarian Dietary Needs

People following a vegetarian diet need to be particularly careful to ensure they are getting a healthy balance of nutrients, and don't become deficient in protein, calcium, Vitamin B12, and particularly iron. Most people get the majority of these nutrients from meat and/or animal products, so ensuring adequate intake from non-meat alternatives requires extra thought and planning.

## Protein

Meat is the main source of protein for many people, therefore to consume adequate protein as a vegetarian, it is important to eat a varied diet.

Good sources of protein for vegetarians include:

- Lentils and other legumes
- Tofu and soy products
- Dairy products
- Nuts and seeds

Whole grain bread, potato, pasta, and corn will also provide small amounts of protein. Remember, non-animal proteins are incomplete, so you will need to eat a wide variety of these foods on a daily basis in order to fulfil your complete range of protein requirements.

## Iron

The nutrient *most at risk of deficiency* in a vegetarian diet is iron. Non-animal sources of iron are not equivalent to animal sources and are typically poorly absorbed in the gut, so it's crucial to ensure you are eating vegetarian iron sources along with foods that will enhance iron absorption, while watching out for foods that inhibit the body's uptake of iron.

- Vegetarian sources of iron: dried beans and other legumes, blackstrap molasses, wheatgerm, pasta, bulgur, spinach, prune juice, and dried fruit (particularly dried apricots)
- Foods that improve iron absorption: citrus fruit or juices, tomato or broccoli (rich in Vitamin C); spreads, oils, full cream dairy (rich in Vitamin A)
- Foods that inhibit iron absorption: caffeinated beverages; legumes and grains containing phytates\*

(\*See our handout *All About Iron*)

## Calcium

If you choose not to eat dairy products, calcium needs to be obtained from alternative sources.

High calcium vegetarian options include:

- Fortified soy milk
- Tofu fortified with calcium

Other sources with smaller amounts of calcium include molasses, almonds, spinach, kale and broccoli

See our handout on *Calcium and Bone Health*



## Vitamin B12

Vitamin B12 is found primarily in animal products. Most people following a vegetarian diet can obtain adequate B12 from dairy products, however if you are following a vegan diet you may need to consider including foods that are artificially fortified with B12, including soy milk and some cereals.

If you are still unsure of how to get an adequate balance in your vegetarian diet, we suggest seeing a dietitian.

Developed in conjunction with Kate Fleming, Dietician

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