

## Vegetarian Eating for Children

It is possible to raise a healthy, vegetarian child, but extra attention must be paid to ensure that they receive the proper balance of carbohydrates, protein, fat, vitamins and minerals. Since vegetarian diets tend to be high in fiber, they are more filling than non-vegetarian diets, and run the risk of not providing sufficient calories to meet the energy needs of growing children.

In order for your child to get enough calories, it is important to ensure that they eat small, frequent meals of higher calorie foods such as nut butter (not peanut) sandwiches (whole grain, preferably homemade/ wheat-free), avocados, nuts and seeds, whole grain pasta (preferably rice), dried fruits and smoothies. Vitamins and minerals that are often deficient in vegetarian diets include B vitamins, especially B12, Vitamin D, Calcium Iron, and Zinc so it is important to ensure your child's diet includes plenty of these.

It is important not to over-emphasize soy protein sources in the diet. Definitely avoid processed soy (eg. Avoid TVP, GMO/ non-organic tofu, soy protein powder, soy milk) and keep unprocessed soy (eg. Soy beans, organic/ non-GMO tofu, tempeh and miso) limited to 2-3 times per week.

When choosing dairy products, be sure all dairy products are organic. Your best choices are yogurt, cottage cheese, some hard cheese. It is best to limit or restrict milk and ice cream, as these are highly mucous forming. Goat milk products can be a good option for children. Children with allergies or weakened immune systems should generally avoid dairy.

Please keep in mind the following principles of childhood nutrition when choosing vegetarianism as an option for your child. I have also listed a number of possible food sources of the various macro and micronutrients in order for your vegetarian child to have a healthy balanced diet, providing adequate nutrition.

### **Macronutrients:**

#### **Carbohydrates**

- infants and children need 2-3 times as much energy, per unit of body weight, as adults
- vegetarian sources: whole grains, legumes, fruits, starchy vegetables, dairy products

#### **Proteins**

- children need more protein per unit of body weight than adults, as it is an essential building block for all tissues, including cell walls, muscles, blood, hair, internal organs, hormones, enzymes, and antibodies
- vegetarian sources: dairy products, eggs
- vegan sources: whole grains, legumes, vegetables, nuts, seeds, soy products

## Fats

- fat supplies energy to growing children, and helps with the absorption of vitamins A, D, E, K
- vegetarian sources: avocados, olives, nuts, seeds, oils, whole fat soy products, whole fat dairy products, egg yolks
- sources of omega-3 (essential) fatty acids: ground flax seeds, pumpkin seeds, almonds, walnuts, chia seeds, flaxseed oil, hempseed oil and nut butters (avoid peanut)

## Micronutrients:

### Vitamin B12

- important for red blood cell formation and maintaining a healthy nervous system
- vegetarian sources: organic dairy products, egg yolks, fortified products

### Calcium

- important for bone and teeth formation
- vegetarian sources: organic dairy products, low oxalate green leafy vegetables (kale, broccoli, Brussel sprouts, turnip greens, cabbage), sea vegetables, soy products, legumes, nuts, seeds, blackstrap molasses

### Vitamin D

- important for the absorption of calcium, and to assimilate phosphorus, which is used in teeth and bone formation
- formed in the body upon exposure of the skin to the UV rays of the sun (i.e. 30 minutes of late afternoon sunlight without sunscreen is sufficient) can also be obtained from fortified foods

### Iron

- essential for the production of healthy blood
- vegetarian sources: sea vegetables, whole grains, legumes, nuts, seeds, green leafy vegetables, blackstrap molasses, egg yolks, foods cooked in cast iron pans
- dairy products should be fed separately from iron rich foods, as calcium interferes with iron absorption

### Zinc

- important for proper enzymatic, nervous and immune function
- vegetarian sources: whole grains, wheat germ, sea vegetables, green leafy vegetables, corn, green peas, potatoes, mushrooms, legumes, soy products, nuts, seeds, dairy products, egg yolks

## Introducing Vegetarian Eating to your Child

**Infancy:** Program your baby to appreciate the tastes of fresh fruits and veggies. Between 5-9 months, introduce a variety of grains, fruits and veggies such as rice, bananas, pears avocados, barley, sweet potatoes, carrots and squash. Introduce soy at one.

**Toddler Years:** Toddlers love to graze, so make a nibble tray with bite sized fruits and veggies, together with a yogurt and avocado dip. Make sure there are enough sources of iron, such as green leafy veggies, raisins, black-eyed peas, blackstrap molasses, and beans. Include iron-fortified foods if necessary.

**Preschool and school years:** Plant a veggie garden. Children are more likely to eat what they grow. Talk about all the different colors in the garden and why it is so important to have a lot of color in the food on your plate. Children will enjoy the concept of a rainbow lunch. Make salad bars a treat when you go out for meals. Encourage your child to help out in the kitchen washing fruits and veggies, and tearing up lettuce. Be creative – you can feed them nut butter sandwiches on whole wheat bread, with fruit preserves and sprouts, instead of the traditional peanut butter and jam. Be sure to incorporate fish and flax oil for essential fatty acids.

Sources: Sears W, M Sears. **The Family Nutrition Book.** New York: Little, Brown and Co. 1999.

Yntema SK, CH Beard. **New Vegetarian Baby.** New York: McBooks Press, 2000.