



RD Resources for Consumers:

Vegetarian Nutrition for Toddlers and Preschoolers

A well-balanced vegetarian diet supports healthy growth and development of toddlers and preschoolers.

These early years are key in the establishment of healthy eating habits that will last a lifetime. A vegetarian diet can provide all the nutrients needed by children at varying stages of growth. A registered dietitian can help parents plan healthy meals and create positive eating habits for the whole family.

Energy Needs and Growth

At age one, weight gain slows and children often begin to eat less. Eating a lot of high fiber foods may cause children to feel full before they have eaten enough calories. A well-balanced vegetarian diet is often high in fiber, which can be found in fruits, vegetables, and whole-grains. To lower fiber, include some refined grain products, fruit juices, and peeled fruits and vegetables.

To increase calories, include high nutrient, high calorie foods such as:

- Avocado
- Nuts and nut butters
- Seeds and seed butters
- Dried fruits
- Vegetable oils
- Full-fat soy and dairy products
- Bean spreads

Good Sources of Key Nutrients

Protein

- Beans and legumes
- Grains
- Tofu
- Meat analogs
- Nuts and nut butters
- Dairy products
- Eggs

Calcium

- Fortified soy or rice milk
- Fortified orange juice
- Milk and yogurt
- Green leafy vegetables (e.g. broccoli, kale, bok choy)
- Calcium-set tofu
- Almonds and almond butter

Tip: Calcium supplementation may be used to compensate for inadequate dietary intake.

Zinc

- Whole-grain products
- Wheat germ
- Fortified cereals
- Tofu
- Nuts
- Beans
- Hard cheese
- Yeast leavened bread
- Fermented soy products (e.g. tempeh, miso)

Vitamin D

- Vitamin D fortified foods (e.g. cow's milk, soymilk or rice milk, orange juice, ready-to-eat cereals)
- Eggs
- Skin exposure to sunlight

Iron

**Iron deficiency anemia is the most common childhood nutritional problem.*

- Whole or enriched grains
- Dried fruits
- Fortified cereals
- Beans and legumes
- Green leafy vegetables

Tip: Include a source of vitamin C (e.g. bell peppers, tomatoes, citrus fruits) with meals to increase iron absorption.

Vitamin B12

- Fortified soymilk
- Some meat analogs
- Vitamin B12-fortified nutritional yeast
- Fortified ready-to-eat cereals
- Eggs
- Dairy products

Tip: A vitamin B12 supplement may be used.

Meal Planning Guidelines

Use these guidelines to create a well-balanced diet. Guidelines show the minimum number of servings for toddlers and preschoolers. Children who need more calories for growth and activity should eat extra servings.

Food Group	# of Servings	Serving Size
Grains	6+	½ cup cooked cereal, rice, or pasta; ½-1 slice bread; ½ bun or muffin; ½-1 cup ready-to-eat cereal; 1 small tortilla; at least ½ of all grains eaten should be whole-grain
Vegetables	2+	¼-½ cup cooked vegetables; ½-1 cup raw vegetables
Fruits	3+	½ medium fruit; ¼-½ cup cooked or canned fruit; ½ cup juice; 2 tbsp. dried fruit
Legumes/nuts	2+*	¼-½ cup cooked beans, tofu, tempeh, textured vegetable protein; 1.5-3 oz. meat analog; 1-2 tbsp. nuts, seeds, nut or seed butter; 1 egg
Milk	3	1 cup fortified soymilk, cow's milk, or breast milk; 1 cup yogurt; 1½ oz. natural cheese
Fats	3-4	1 tsp. oil or margarine

* Include at least 1 serving per day of nuts/seeds or 1 full-fat soy product.

Choking Risks

Toddlers and preschoolers are at an increased risk of choking because of immature chewing and swallowing skills, fewer teeth, and unwillingness to take the time to carefully chew food. To minimize choking risk, the following foods should be avoided by toddlers or eaten by preschoolers only with supervision:



- Nuts, except when finely ground
- Nut butters by the spoonful
- Vegetarian hot dogs, unless sliced lengthwise and then crosswise
- Cherry tomatoes, unless halved or quartered
- Grapes, unless cut in half. Peeling may be needed for young toddlers.
- Raw cherries, unless pitted and sliced
- Raw celery and whole raw carrots
- Popcorn

Tips for Creating Healthy Eating Habits

- Offer a variety of foods, repeatedly. Children's likes and dislikes often change.
- Make food fun. Cut food into shapes, add color with fruits and vegetables, or try finger foods.
- Set a good example. Let children see you eating healthy foods.
- Add vegetables, tofu, or fruit to favorite foods.
- Include children in cooking and mealtime activities.
- Allow preschoolers to choose the portion of food that they want to eat.
- Do not force a child to eat or use food as a reward.
- Limit fruit juice to 4 to 6 ounces/day.

Resources

Feeding Vegan Kids by Reed Mangels, PhD, RD. <http://www.vrg.org/nutshell/kids.htm>, 2009.

Raising Vegetarian Children by Joanne Stepaniak, MEd. and Vesanto Melina, MS, RD. Contemporary Books, 2003.

Vegan Lunch Box by Jennifer McCann. Da Capo Press, 2008.

Vegetarian Nutrition

a dietetic practice group of the

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