

Tips and Resources for Parents of a Vegan or Vegetarian

Your son or daughter has not made the decision to become vegan or vegetarian to make family dinners more complicated or to reject you. They have likely made this decision out of compassion for animals, concern for the environment, or to improve their own health—motivations that you can and should be proud of. And they will be proud of and appreciate your respect for their decision and support in their new diet.

First of all, some clarification on what your child's new diet means:

Vegetarian: Someone who does not consume animal flesh (including red meat, poultry, and fish and other seafood).

Vegan: Someone who does not consume animal flesh or any other animal products or byproducts (eggs, dairy, whey, gelatin, rennet, casein, honey, etc.). Most vegans also avoid leather, fur, wool, and other animal-sourced clothing, along with animal-tested cosmetics and household products.

They'll still be healthy...right?

Yes, on a well-balanced vegan diet, your child can be even healthier than before. The American Dietetic Association and Dietitians of Canada say "well-planned vegan and other types of vegetarian diets are appropriate for all stages of the life cycle including during pregnancy, lactation, infancy, childhood, and adolescence." And vegans have a longer average lifespan than people who eat animal products. Additionally, a vegan diet can reduce the risk of heart disease, diabetes, obesity, and some types of cancer.

But how do they get enough protein?

Getting enough protein really isn't an issue in a well-balanced diet. In fact, most Americans get more protein than they need, which can be a contributing factor to osteoporosis.

An abundance of vegan foods contain protein, and it is better for the body to get protein from plant sources than animal sources. Animal sources of protein are high in saturated fat and cholesterol, both of which are harmful to health.

Vegan sources of protein include grain products (breads, cereals, pasta, corn, rice, etc), beans, soy products, faux meats (burgers, dogs, nuggets, slices, ground, sausage, and brats), seeds, peas, nuts, peanut and nut butters, and legumes. Check the protein content on food labels to see how many different options there are for getting an adequate amount of protein from a vegan diet.

What about calcium?

Soy milks can contain as much calcium as cow milk. Cholesterol-filled dairy products can be abandoned as calcium sources; a vegan diet can fully supply calcium needs.

Common vegan sources of calcium include, but aren't limited to, soy products (including tofu), tahini (sesame butter), beans, figs, sunflower seeds, broccoli, almonds, hazelnuts, fortified orange juice, kale, and collard greens.

And iron?

Anemia is actually no more common in vegans than in non-vegans, though that is not to say a change in diet will or has caused a loss of iron.

There are many vegan sources of iron, including fortified breakfast cereals, spinach, soy products, beans, potatoes, and lentils. Iron supplements are also an option, and many multi-vitamins contain iron. While not the most "natural" way to get iron, supplements are more natural and a lot better health wise than consuming eggs or dairy.

One simple thing people often do to get more iron is cook with a cast iron skillet. The iron in the skillet actually absorbs into the food. Using sweeteners like maple syrup and molasses adds iron to the diet as well.

Vitamin C improves iron absorption, so it is important to get plenty of vitamin C.

The antibiotic Tetracycline interferes with iron absorption.

In females, hormonal birth control [the pill, the ring] often helps iron retention by reducing monthly flow.

Here are some charts of vegan foods high in iron:

<http://www.dfwnetmall.com/veg/plantfoodshighcontentiron.htm>

<http://www.vrg.org/nutrition/iron.htm>

<http://www.vegansociety.com/html/food/nutrition/iron.php>

Do they need to take vitamins?

A well-rounded vegan diet can supply someone with all of their vitamin needs, but many vegans take a vegan multi-vitamin to be sure. Of special concern to vegans is vitamin B-12, which is largely found in animal products. Although some vegan foods contain added B-12, many vegans take a B-12 supplement. We recommend a B-12 supplement a few times a week to be safe because B-12 deficiency might not show up for 15 to 20 years. Whole Foods has vegan B-12 for about \$6 per 100.

But what about...?

Still have more nutrition and health questions? That's okay. Perfectly normal, actually, and there is more information out there that can further put you at ease in knowing that your child can get everything they need from their food as a vegan. To learn more about vegan and vegetarian health, visit the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine: www.pcrm.org To learn more about vegan and vegetarian nutrition, visit the Vegetarian Resource Group: www.vrg.org

Okay, so now what do I cook for them?

Plenty of stuff. And it doesn't have to be about their food vs. yours; it can be about your family exploring new food options together and getting your child more involved in food preparation.

Recipes, Recipes, Recipes

A lot of vegan recipes are out there, whether they be familiar dishes that you haven't thought of as "vegan" before (such as spaghetti with marinara sauce), common dishes with a vegan twist (such as substituting a veggie burger for a beef burger or soy milk on cereal), or completely new vegan dishes (no, they don't all contain tofu).

You can find new recipes yourself, have your child seek some out, or look through recipes together to find dishes that the whole family can enjoy.

Some great websites with vegan recipes are www.vegcooking.com, www.vegweb.com, and www.chooseveg.com. Or, type the name of the desired food or recipe into a search engine along with the word "vegan" and you are likely to find many options. Numerous vegan cookbooks are also available at bookstores and through online retailers.

But wait. Cooking with no dairy or eggs?

Of course! Numerous alternatives to dairy products and eggs are available.

Dairy alternatives: Soy, rice, almond, hemp, hazelnut, and oat milks (chocolate, vanilla, plain, strawberry, and carob flavors); vegan soy and rice cheeses (VeganRella, Follow Your Heart Vegan Gourmet, Tofutti singles, Galaxy Nutritional Foods Soy and Rice singles, Soymage Vegan Parmesan, Sheese); vegan mac & "cheese" (Roads End Organics Shells and Chreese), Tofutti cream cheese and sour cream (Better Than Cream Cheese and Sour Supreme); Silk brand soy coffee creamer, nog, and chai; "ice cream" made from soy, rice, or coconut milk (Soy Delicious, Purely Decadent, Tofutti, Soy Dream, Rice Dream, Trader Joe's Soy Creamy, Temptation, Whole Soy frozen "yogurt," Coconut Bliss, Rice Dream moon pies, Tofutti and Soy Delicious ice cream sandwiches and fudge bars); dairy-free margarines (Earth Balance, Nucoa, and Smart Balance Light); soy yogurts (Silk, Whole Soy, Trader Joe's, Wildwood, Stonyfield Farms, Nancy's).

Egg alternatives: As a scrambled egg replacement, tofu scrambles are popular (you can use a recipe or a mix [Fantastic Foods Tofu Scramble]); for baking, you can use ENER-G Egg Replacer (a boxed powder available at most health food stores, ask your grocer to carry it if they do not - one box is about \$6 and replaces about 113 "eggs") or substitute either ½ banana, 2T cornstarch, 2T potato starch, 2T arrowroot powder, or about ¼ cup of applesauce in place of one egg.

Dining Out

Yes, you can still go out to eat with your child, and no, they don't have to just order the salad. Many restaurants accommodate vegetarians and vegans, and many cities even have restaurants that are all vegetarian or vegan. Asian, Indian, Mexican, and Mediterranean restaurants usually offer many vegan or vegetarian dishes, or selections that can be made vegan by request. For lists of veg-friendly, vegetarian, and vegan restaurants by city, visit: www.happycow.net

And finally...shopping time!

Don't worry – you aren't limited to health food stores or that special "natural foods" aisle of the grocery store. You can still shop at your local grocery store and find enough vegan items to more than fill your cart. Definitely check out the faux meat section (usually in the refrigerated area, but just ask if you can't find it), but go in every other aisle as well. Just check the ingredients and discover how many common foods are vegan. Even Oreos are vegan!

For a list of many "accidentally vegan" foods, visit www.peta.org/accidentallyvegan



For more vegan information and resources or to request a free vegan starter pack, visit the Action for Animals website at www.afa-online.org