

GRAB AND GO LESSON

Vegetarian Diets for Young Children

Nutrition and Meal Management |
Nutrition Needs

Purpose: This handout provides the common vegetarian diets and review ideas for serving vegetarian meals.

A vegetarian is a person who does not eat foods from animal sources. They choose plant-based foods, such as grains, beans, vegetables, fruits, and nuts.

A vegetarian diet can be a healthy choice for young children. It tends to be lower in saturated fat and contains more fiber, potassium, vitamin C, folate, and other nutrients than non-plant based diets. Generally, children who follow a plant-based diet into adulthood have a lower risk of obesity, high blood pressure, heart disease, and cancer.

Types of Vegetarians

The most common categories of vegetarian diets consist of the following:

- Lacto-ovo vegetarians consume eggs, dairy products, and all plant-based foods, including grains, vegetables, fruits, legumes (dry beans, peas, and lentils), soy products, nuts, and seeds in their diets.
- Lacto-vegetarians include milk and dairy products in their diet, as well as all plant-based foods.
- Ovo-vegetarians consume eggs, as well as all plant-based foods
- Vegans eat only plant-based foods, avoiding animal products such as fish, dairy, and honey.
- Semi-vegetarians, sometimes called “flexitarians,” eat mostly plant-based diets but may include small amounts of chicken and fish in their diets.

Meeting the CACFP Meal Pattern Requirements

When properly planned, a plant-based eating pattern can meet the nutrient needs for growing, active young children. The great news is, as a child care provider, you can use existing Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) meal pattern requirements to plan meals and snacks that meet the needs of vegetarian children. The meal pattern requirements offer plant-based choices for all of the food groups except for milk. In those cases, where a child’s diet prevents drinking cow’s milk, you must serve a milk equivalent to cow’s milk for a reimbursable meal. Work with parents or guardians, your State agency, or sponsoring organization to identify an alternative milk option.

You do not have to prepare an entirely different set of meals and snacks. Instead, plan menus that include simple side dishes, which can combine to meet the child’s nutrition requirements. For example, you can top vegetable-based soups or salads with beans, sunflower seeds, or crumbled eggs (scrambled eggs finely chopped). Nut butter sandwiches, baked beans, bean-based dips and spreads, cheese slices, or yogurt also make easy menu additions.

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Serving a Variety of Foods

Careful planning is important for diet variety and quality. Nutrients such as protein, calcium, vitamin D, iron, vitamin B12, and zinc are critical for proper growth and development in children. Although meat and milk are significant sources of these nutrients, there are also several plant-based sources.

- Protein: Legumes, soy products, peanut and other nut butters, nuts, dairy products, eggs
- Calcium: Dairy products, calcium-fortified soy or rice milk, calcium-fortified 100% juice, dark green leafy vegetables, almonds
- Vitamin D: Fortified cow's milk, mushrooms, some brands of fortified soy or rice milk, some fortified breakfast cereals
- Iron: Whole or enriched grains, iron-fortified cereals, legumes, green leafy vegetables, dried fruits
- Vitamin B12: Foods fortified with vitamin B12, including fortified soy milk, fortified nutritional yeast, and fortified breakfast cereals
- Zinc: Legumes, hard cheeses, whole-grain products, wheat germ, nuts, some fortified breakfast cereals

References

- Hayes, D. (2019). *Feeding vegetarian and vegan infants and toddlers*. Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics/Eat Right. <http://www.eatright.org/resource/food/nutrition/vegetarian-and-special-diets/feeding-vegetarian-and-vegan-infants-and-toddlers>
- The Vegetarian Resource Groups. (2017). *Most frequently asked questions*. <http://www.vrg.org/nutshell/faq.htm#types>

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