



Patient & Family Guide  
2025

# Vegetarian Variety



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# Vegetarian Variety

- It is important to eat a variety of foods when you follow a vegetarian eating plan. A vegetarian eating plan can meet your nutrition needs and has many health benefits.
- Most people think that being a vegetarian means you cannot eat meat, fish, or poultry (like chicken, turkey). But there are many types of vegetarian eating plans:
  - › **Vegan** focuses on plant-based foods (like fruits and vegetables, whole grains, legumes, soy, nuts, and seeds) and avoids animal products.
  - › **Lacto-vegetarian** is similar to vegan, but can also include milk and milk products (like cheese, kefir\*, and yogurt).
  - › **Lacto-ovo vegetarian** is similar to vegan, but can also include milk, milk products, and eggs.
  - › **Pescatarian** is similar to vegan, but can also include milk, milk products, eggs, and fish.
  - › **Flexitarian** focuses on plant-based foods, but can also include meat every once in a while.

- No matter what type of vegetarian eating plan you choose, eating a wide variety of plant-based foods will help you meet your nutrition needs.
- Make sure you get enough of the following nutrients:
  - › Protein
  - › Iron
  - › Zinc
  - › Calcium
  - › Vitamin D
  - › Vitamin B12
  - › Omega 3 fats

**Ask your primary health care provider (family doctor or nurse practitioner) or a dietitian if you need any supplements.**

\*See page 9 for more information about these foods.

## **Protein**

- Your body uses protein to build and repair cells, heal, build muscle, and fight infections.
- Choose a variety of protein foods at each meal and snack.

### **Plant-based protein sources include:**

- › Soy and soy products (like tofu\*, edamame\*, tempeh\*, textured vegetable protein [TVP]\*, plant-based burgers, other meat substitutes, and fortified [made stronger] soy drinks)
- › Legumes (like dried or canned beans, lentils, and chickpeas)
- › Whole grains (like quinoa, bulgur, brown rice, and oatmeal)
- › Nuts and seeds (like almonds, walnuts, cashews, peanuts, nut butters, sesame seeds, sunflower seeds, and flax seeds)

### **Non-plant-based\* protein sources include:**

- › Milk
- › Cheese
- › Yogurt
- › Kefir\*
- › Eggs
- › Meat
- › Poultry
- › Fish

## Iron

- You need iron to carry oxygen to all parts of your body. Iron from plant foods is not absorbed (taken in) by your body as well as iron from animal foods. If you do not eat animal foods, you will need to eat almost 2 times as much plant-based sources of iron.

### **Plant-based sources of iron include:**

- › Legumes (like dried or canned beans, lentils, and chickpeas)
- › Soy and soy products (like fortified soy drinks, tofu, edamame, tempeh, TVP, plant-based burgers, and other meat substitutes)
- › Whole grains and grain products made with iron-enriched flour
- › Dried fruits
- › Dark green, leafy vegetables
- › Nuts and seeds

### **Tips to help you get more iron:**

- Your body can absorb iron more easily when you eat it with foods that are high in vitamin C, like:
  - › Oranges
  - › Grapefruits
  - › Tomatoes
  - › Strawberries
  - › Peppers
  - › Broccoli
  - › Fruit juices

- Tea and coffee can affect how much iron your body absorbs. **Do not** drink tea or coffee for at least 1 hour after a meal or snack.
- Cook in cast iron cookware to add more iron to your food.

## **Zinc**

- Your body needs zinc to keep your immune system and brain healthy, and to help with wound healing.

### **Plant-based sources of zinc include:**

- › Legumes (like dried or canned beans, lentils, and chickpeas)
- › Soy and soy products (like fortified soy drinks, tofu, edamame, tempeh, TVP, plant-based burgers, and other meat substitutes)
- › Nuts and seeds (like peanuts, peanut butter, sesame seeds, tahini, pumpkin seeds, and cashews)
- › Whole grains, wild rice, wheat germ, and fortified cereals

### **Non-plant-based sources of zinc include:**

- › Milk and milk products
- › Meat, poultry, and fish
- › Eggs

## Calcium

- Your body needs calcium for blood clotting and to keep your bones, teeth, muscles, nerves, and heart healthy.

### **Plant-based sources of calcium include:**

- › Soybeans and soy products (like soy yogurt, fortified soy drinks, and calcium-fortified tofu)
- › Fortified almond or rice drinks
- › Legumes (like dried or canned beans, lentils, and chickpeas)
- › Dark green vegetables (like broccoli, kale, and spinach)
- › Almonds and almond butter
- › Sesame seeds and tahini
- › Blackstrap molasses
- › Figs
- › Fortified orange juice

### **Non-plant-based sources of calcium include:**

- › Milk and milk products (like cheese, kefir, and yogurt)
- › Sardines
- › Canned salmon with bones

## **Vitamin D**

- Your body needs vitamin D to keep your immune system healthy. It also helps your body absorb calcium for strong bones and teeth.
- You need more vitamin D as you get older.
- You may need to take a vitamin D supplement. This is because it is often hard to get enough vitamin D from food.
- Vitamin D is measured in international units (IU). Health Canada recommends that people over 50 years old take a 400 IU vitamin D supplement every day.

### **Plant-based sources of vitamin D include:**

- › Fortified soy, rice, oat, cashew, coconut, and almond drinks
- › Non-hydrogenated soft margarines

### **Non-plant-based sources of vitamin D include:**

- › Fortified milk
- › Fatty fish (like salmon, mackerel, herring, and sardines)
- › Eggs

## Vitamin B12

- Vitamin B12 helps your body make red blood cells and keeps your nervous system healthy.
- It is only found naturally in animal foods (like meat, fish, poultry, eggs, milk, cheese, kefir, and yogurt). It must be added to plant-based foods.

### **Plant-based sources of vitamin B12 include:**

- › Fortified soy, almond, and rice drinks
- › Fortified nutritional yeast
- › Fortified TVP and meat substitutes
- Low levels of Vitamin B12 can cause anemia (low red blood cells).

### **If you do not eat any animal products:**

- › You need to eat foods fortified with vitamin B12.
- › You may need a vitamin B12 supplement.
- Adults over the age of 50 years do not absorb vitamin B12 well. **If you are over 50 years old:**
  - › You need to eat foods fortified with vitamin B12.
  - › You may need a vitamin B12 supplement.
  - › You can add nutritional yeast to your food to get more vitamin B12.

## Omega 3 fats

- Your body must have omega 3 fats for heart, eye, and brain health.
- Fish is the best source of omega 3 fats.

### Plant-based sources of omega 3 fats include:

- › Canola, flaxseed, walnut, and soybean oils
- › Walnuts, soybeans, and tofu
- › Ground flax, chia, and hemp seeds
- Some soy drinks, breads, orange juices, eggs, and soft margarines may be fortified with omega 3 fats. Check the nutrition label.

## What are these foods?

- **Kefir** is a fermented milk product.
- **Tofu** (also called bean curd) is made from soy. This makes it a very good protein source.
  - › Tofu can be soft, firm, or extra firm.
  - › It takes on the flavour of whatever it is cooked with.
- **Edamame** are green soy beans (either shelled or still in the pods).
  - › Shelled edamame is great in salads or rice dishes.

- **Tempeh** is cooked, fermented soybeans formed into a patty.
  - › Try adding it to stir fries, or crumble it into soups or chili.
- **Textured vegetable protein (TVP)** is made from soy flour. It may also be labelled as **textured soy protein (TSP)**.
  - › Because it is dehydrated (the liquid is removed), you must cook it with a liquid for 10 minutes or more.
  - › It takes on the flavour of whatever it is cooked with. When cooked, it has a texture like cooked ground meat.
  - › It works well in casseroles, pasta sauces, soups, taco fillings, and chili.
- **Tahini** is a paste made from sesame seeds.
  - › It is used as a spread or a dip. It is also an ingredient in hummus.
- **Non-plant-based** means foods or products from animal sources.

## Shopping list

Try a variety of these foods.

### Vegetables and fruit:

- › Dark green, leafy vegetables
- › Garlic and onions
- › Vegetables and fruit in season
- › Tomato sauce and paste, canned tomatoes
- › Dried fruit
- › Avocados
- Choose a variety of fresh, frozen, or canned fruit and vegetables.
- Choose fruit and vegetable juices less often.

### Protein foods:

- › Edamame
- › Dried or canned beans (like navy beans, kidney beans, black beans, lima beans), lentils, and chickpeas
- › Legume products (like hummus, soups, and falafel)
- › Legume pasta
- › Nuts (like almonds, walnuts, peanuts, and cashews)

- › Nut butters (like almond and peanut) and seed butters (like pumpkin seed, tahini, and sesame)
- › Seeds (like sesame, pumpkin, sunflower, flax, hemp, and chia)
- › Soybean products, fortified soy drinks
- › Tempeh
- › Tofu
- › TVP
- › Milk and milk alternatives
- › Cheese (made from milk or soy)
- › Yogurt (made from milk or soy)
- › Kefir

### **Other sources of protein:**

- › Store-bought meat substitutes (like plant-based burgers, hot dogs, and sausages).

**Note:** These products are often high in sodium (salt), sugar, or saturated fat. Check the nutrition label.

- › Eggs, meat, fish, and poultry
- › **Whole and enriched grains:**
  - › Flour (like whole wheat, buckwheat, spelt, or barley)

- › Rice (like brown, wild, or basmati).  
Parboiled rice is OK.
- › Cereals
- › Rolled or steel cut oats
- › Whole grain breads, pitas, bagels, and tortillas
- › Whole grain crackers
- › Enriched or whole grain pasta
- › Legume pasta
- › Quinoa, bulgur, couscous, barley, and other grains
- › Wheat germ and natural bran

### **Other foods:**

- › Nutritional yeast (choose fortified with vitamin B12)
- › Blackstrap molasses
- › Oils made from canola, olives, soybeans, or flaxseed
- › Non-hydrogenated margarine
- › Tofunaise or mayonnaise
- › Fortified almond or other non-dairy drinks, non-dairy cheese, and non-dairy yogurt.

**Note:** Unless these are made from soy, they are **not** good sources of protein.

## For recipes and more information:

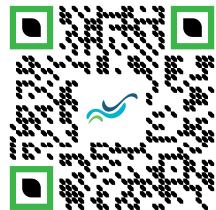
### Canada's Food Guide

- Canada's Food Guide recommends eating a variety of healthy foods each day. Have plenty of vegetables and fruits. Eat plant-based protein foods more often. Choose whole grain foods. Drink water often.
- To help you plan healthy vegetarian meals, visit:
  - › <https://food-guide.canada.ca/en>

### User-friendly Pulses - Preparing Dried Beans, Peas, and Lentils

- Please use the QR code or the link below, or ask a member of your health care team for this pamphlet.
  - › [www.nshealth.ca/patient-education-resources/0565](http://www.nshealth.ca/patient-education-resources/0565)

Scan the QR code on your device (open the camera on your device, point the camera at the code, and tap the banner or border that appears)



## Vegetarian and Vegan Diets - UnlockFood.ca™

- Nutrition and recipe information about vegetarian and vegan foods:
  - › [www.unlockfood.ca/en/Articles/Vegetarian-and-Vegan-Diets](http://www.unlockfood.ca/en/Articles/Vegetarian-and-Vegan-Diets)

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Find all patient education resources here:  
[www.nshealth.ca/patient-education-resources](http://www.nshealth.ca/patient-education-resources)

Connect with a registered nurse in Nova Scotia any time:  
Call 811 or visit: <https://811.novascotia.ca>

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