



Vegetarian eating and eating disorders

What is vegetarian eating?

Vegetarian eating is choosing to avoid foods containing meat, fish and chicken, and instead eating foods that mostly come from plants.

The most common types of vegetarian eating are:

- lacto-ovo: milk, dairy products and eggs are included
- ovo-vegetarian: eggs are included
- lacto-vegetarian: dairy products are included
- vegan: all foods of animal origin are avoided

Does vegetarian eating mean disordered eating?

Vegetarian eating can be perfectly healthy if well planned. It is important to think about the reasons behind why someone might want to become a vegetarian.

The most common reasons people choose a vegetarian eating pattern are:

- ethical reasons, e.g. animal welfare, environmental
- health reasons, i.e. for perceived health benefits
- religious reasons
- weight control reasons

A large number of people with eating disorders decide to become vegetarian during their illness, to help lose weight or to mask the self-restriction of particular foods or food groups. These behaviours are important to address as exposure and response prevention helps those with eating disorders.

Choosing to become a vegetarian is a big decision. It can pose extra eating challenges, especially for people with eating disorders. Vegetarian eating does not just mean cutting out meat, chicken and fish; it requires choosing plant-based foods that will supply all the nutrients that are usually provided by animal-based foods.

Vegetarians generally need to know more about nutrition than others. This may exacerbate any preoccupation with food or rigid food rules that may already exist. Choosing to be vegetarian is not usually a helpful choice to make during the recovery from an eating disorder.

Nutrients requiring particular attention for vegetarians

Protein

Dietary protein is required for the growth, repair and maintenance of muscle, skin, and organ tissues.

Vegetarian food sources include:

- beans and pulses e.g. soy, kidney, baked beans, chickpeas and lentils
- milk and dairy products*
- soy products e.g. soy milk, tofu and tempeh
- eggs**
- nuts and seeds

Iron

Dietary iron is essential to carry oxygen around the body in the blood, for energy production and to maintain a healthy immune system.

Eating vegetarian iron foods with foods high in vitamin C help to increase its absorption – foods include many fruits and vegetables, such as citrus fruits, strawberry, tomato, broccoli, kiwifruit and capsicum, among others.

Vegetarian food sources include:

- wholegrain breads and cereals
- fortified breakfast cereals
- dark green leafy vegetables
- pulses e.g. soy, kidney and baked beans, chickpeas and lentils
- nuts and dried fruits

Zinc

Zinc is essential for growth, reproduction, wound healing and the storage of insulin.

Vegetarian food sources include:

- wholegrain bread and cereals
- nuts
- milk and dairy products*

Vitamin B12

This vitamin is essential for the formation of DNA, red blood cells and nerve cells. It is only found naturally in foods of animal origin.

Vegetarian food sources include:

- plant foods that are fortified with b12
- vitamin b12 supplements. ask your dietitian to recommend one for you

Calcium

Dietary calcium is essential for the growth and maintenance of healthy, strong bones and teeth. It is also required for the normal functioning of the nervous system and muscles. The main source of calcium is milk and dairy products.

Vegetarian food sources include:

- milk and dairy products*
- fish canned with their bones e.g. salmon, sardines
- fortified soymilk and soy yoghurt look for brands with 100mg/100ml.
- sesame seeds and tahini
- almonds and brazil nuts
- tofu set with calcium sulphate
- (check the label)
- dried fruit and leafy green vegetables

Omega-3

Omega-3 is an essential fatty acid necessary for optimal brain functioning and to assist in preventing heart disease, high blood pressure, autoimmune disease, arthritis and several cancers.

Vegetarian food sources include:

- seeds, nuts and oils e.g. chia seeds, canola oil, walnuts and wheat germ
- eggs**

*Not suitable for ovo-vegetarian or vegan

**Not suitable for lacto-vegetarian or vegan

A sample menu for vegetarian eating

Meal	Food ideas (Quantities according to appetite)
Breakfast	Porridge/oats or wholegrain breakfast cereal + wheatgerm Cow's milk or fortified soy milk Wholemeal toast + butter/margarine + spread Fruit or fruit juice
Lunch	Sandwiches/wrap made with wholegrain bread + butter/margarine + cheese or egg or hummus and salad vegetables Fruit and yoghurt
Dinner	Chickpea and vegetable curry with rice or Tofu and vegetable stir-fry with noodles Stewed fruit with custard or ice cream
Snacks	Nuts or dried fruit or yoghurt or crackers + spread

For an interesting and evidence based discussion regarding the ethical considerations of having an eating disorder and following a vegetarian lifestyle read:

www.youreatopia.com/blog/2016/3/8/eating-disorders-i-want-to-save-the-animals