

Eat Like a Vegan/Vegetarian Without Giving Up Your Favorite Foods

Make a positive health difference with just a few small changes.

Vegan and vegetarian diets are the healthiest dietary plans to follow today. They're all-natural, unprocessed (no preservatives or additives), lower in fat than processed foods or meat, and packed with a wide variety of nutrients. "Eating this way decreases your risk of obesity, type 2 diabetes, and heart disease," says Rachel Lustgarten, a registered dietitian nutritionist with Weill Cornell Medicine.

As an added benefit, the path vegetables take to market and then to your home creates a much lower carbon footprint than the path taken with meat.

Afraid you will have to give up too much or that you won't be satisfied? Don't worry. Your food options are many, you won't lack for flavor or satisfaction, and it's not an "all-or-nothing" deal. Here are some ways you can eat more like a vegan or vegetarian without giving up everything you love.

Expand Your Nutrition Palate

Try not to be a creature of habit when it comes to your meals. If you eat the same foods week after week, you may be getting plenty of a few key nutrients, but also may be lacking in others. Perhaps it's time to expand your palate. "Plant-based diets are an effective strategy for improving nutrient intake," Lustgarten says.

For example, if you're a traditionalist when it comes to salads, with lettuce, tomato, cucumber, and onion, try giving it a nutrition boost. Replace iceberg lettuce with romaine—it has 10 times the beta-carotene, which converts to vitamin A in your body. Vitamin A helps maintain healthy eyes, as well as your immune system, heart, lungs, kidneys, and reproductive organs.

A half-cup of diced bell peppers can provide over 300 percent of your Daily Value (DV) of vitamin C and 10 percent of vitamin B₆, which helps create red blood cells and neurotransmitters in

the nervous system and brain. Red peppers are the most ripe and have the most nutrients.

Add chickpeas (also called garbanzo beans) to your salad or as a meal side dish, or eat hummus (made from chickpeas) as a mid-afternoon snack. A half-cup of chickpeas provides 5 grams of protein for building and repairing bones, muscles, and blood, and fiber, which helps lower cholesterol and balance blood sugar with insulin.

Skip Starch; Have a Second Vegetable

Two vegetables in one meal is not too much if you vary the textures and flavors, and you wouldn't have to do it every day. Start with one to two days a week, and then increase as you grow comfortable with your options.

For instance, beets add a touch of sweet and crunch to your plate. A 3½ ounce serving provides 20 percent of your Daily Value of folate, a B vitamin that helps your body make DNA.

Lentils—a legume along with beans, peas, chickpeas, soybeans, and peanuts—are soft and chewy when cooked, filling, and loaded with iron, potassium, magnesium, phosphorus, and zinc. These minerals help with bones, hormones, and nerve impulses. A legume could replace a starch such as rice, pasta, or mashed potatoes and would significantly increase the variety and amount of nutrients you consume in one meal.

One vegetable that has made a tremendous comeback today is Brussels sprouts, and the reason is the way they are prepared: halved, tossed lightly in olive oil, roasted in the oven for 30 minutes to get crunchy, then tossed with balsamic vinegar, a touch of honey, and even some parmesan cheese. With all that flavor, you also get 124 percent of your DV of vitamin C, along with potassium, protein, iron, and 10 percent of your DV of vitamin B₆.



Darker leaf lettuces (such as romaine pictured here) have more nutrients than lighter-colored lettuces (like iceberg).

Skip Meat Once or Twice a Week

Even if you're a meat lover, you likely won't miss it once or twice a week. Check out meatlessmonday.com for ideas on how to substitute meat with another food item you might enjoy as much. You could even have the same food type as previously planned but with different ingredients, such as a veggie burger or veggie hot dog. Or search the website by ingredient based on what you have in your fridge and cabinets.

Remember that seafood has protein, and the American Heart Association recommends that adults consume two servings of fish a week.

"Eating a balanced and varied vegetarian or vegan diet can ensure you have adequate protein intake," says Lustgarten. Also, "foods such as tofu, tempeh, nuts, seeds, and quinoa (in addition to lentils and other legumes) are good sources of protein."

Planned properly, vegan and vegetarian diets are healthful and effective for controlling your weight, blood sugar, blood pressure, and cholesterol.

Don't Forget Whole Grains

Consume one helping of grains at every meal, with half your grains being whole grains. A great source of complex carbs, whole grains help maintain low blood pressure and blood sugar, as well as reduce weight, inflammation, and risk of colorectal cancer. 🌾