

**PARENTING MATTERS**

# Should your child go vegan?

*Experts believe veganism is acceptable at even a young age, if you proceed with care*

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**SINGAPORE** – Mention “veganism”, and many think of adults who abstain from eating or using animals and animal products. Famous vegan celebrities then come to mind, such as Jennifer Lopez, Ellen DeGeneres and Joaquin Phoenix (who was raised vegan by his eco-conscious parents).

Actress Alicia Silverstone has been very vocal about bringing up her five-year-old son, Bear, on a vegan diet. She has written a vegan cookbook, *The Kind Diet*, and runs its associated website.

The shift to clean eating and conscious living is growing in Singapore, and some parents are choosing to raise their children as vegans.

Homemaker Roopinder Parmar, 39, has three children aged 7 to 17, and her entire family has been ve-

gan for four years now. She was motivated to cut out meat and dairy after watching a video which addressed animal cruelty on dairy farms.

“Within three months on the diet, I could feel the difference in my health,” she said. “I lost weight, and my energy levels shot up. My husband’s high cholesterol dropped to normal levels. However, the greatest improvement was in my son’s health. He had sinus issues and an ENT surgeon even advised surgery to remove his turbinates for better and easier breathing. Upon going vegan, his breathing improved tremendously and he was able to stop using steroid medications.”

## VEGAN FROM BIRTH

Nina Devouge, 32, a relationship manager, went vegan while she was pregnant with her son, Hugo, who is now 10 months old and follows a vegan and gluten-free diet.

“I was not keen on putting inferior meats in his body. Most of the meat and fish available are injected with hormones and antibiotics, some even with colour, and they are not



Supplement your vegan child’s diet with vitamins B12 and D, and zinc, protein, calcium and iron, which they often lack. PHOTO:ISTOCK

in the natural form they should be,” she explained.

“We do give him supplements such as flaxseed oil for his omegas (fatty acids) and sodium ascorbate with Vitamin C to help him boost his immune system, as well as probiotics.”

Hugo’s typical meals are as follows: Freshly pressed green juice and cereal with a fruit in the morning; steamed broccoli and carrots and a potato, leek and celery puree for lunch; and steamed sweet potato and cauliflower and a parsnip and beetroot puree for dinner. Devouge does, however, feed him milk.

“Having gone back to work, I found my own milk supply dropping,” she said.

“Since I couldn’t find a good supply of breast milk, I’ve decided for now to go for the next best alternative which is goat’s milk, instead of cow’s milk. While we would have liked (for him) to be a hundred per cent vegan, we recognise that this is what he needs a bit of right now.”

## THE EXPERTS’ VIEW

So what do the experts think of children who follow vegan diets? Jaclyn Reutens, dietician, Aptima Nutrition & Sports Consultants, warned that parents need to be aware that a child following a vegan diet is at a high risk of several nutrient deficiencies.

“If they wish to persist with the diet, they need to be very well-informed of how to prevent these deficiencies, which will impair growth and development in their child,” she said.

Nutrients that vegan children

could be missing out on include vitamins B12 and D, and zinc, protein, calcium and iron.

“It is possible to replace these nutrients with iron, calcium, vitamin D and B12 supplements for a quick boost,” she continued.

“However, with protein, they would have to rely on protein from plant sources (tofu, beans, pulses, nuts, seeds, soya bean products), which are not as bio-available (the proportion of a nutrient absorbed from the diet and used for body functions) to the body as animal sources.”

Bibi Chia, principal dietitian at Raffles Hospital’s Raffles Diabetes & Endocrine Centre, suggested that if done correctly and supplemented properly, a vegan diet is fine for children.

“A child can follow a vegan diet at any age as long as it is well planned, with all the essential nutrients. The child should be consuming sufficient calories and certain nutrients such as protein, zinc, iron, calcium, and vitamin B12. Breastfeeding is recommended for at least six months, and lactating mothers should ensure sufficient nutrient intake while breastfeeding,” said Chia.

## THE CASE FOR GLUTEN

Both Chia and Reutens agreed that there is no need for children to follow a gluten-free diet, unless the child has been diagnosed to have coeliac disease, gluten intolerance or sensitivity by a doctor.

“Parents should not self-diagnose and put their child unnecessarily on a gluten-free diet. It will stunt their growth and development,” said Reutens.

“Gluten is found in many nutritious foods such as whole grains, wholemeal, rye, barley, and some oat products. Cutting out these foods actually puts you at risk of several nutrient deficiencies such as dietary fibre, zinc, selenium, magnesium and the B vitamins.”

She also revealed that such diets could affect energy levels as “these diets revolve mainly around fruits and vegetables and less around carbohydrates and protein, which are two main energy contributors”.

She added: “Vegan and gluten-free diets tend to be lower in fat, which means the overall calorie intake tends to be low and energy levels will also be lowered.”

Chia said that, if their meals are carefully planned, “vegan or gluten-free kids should perform like any other child”.

Parmar’s daughter, Shreya, 17, is enjoying being a vegan. “Going vegan was a life-defining moment. It’s not only a diet, it’s a lifestyle and I feel proud to call myself a vegan,” said Parmar. “I do get a lot of questions, however, I receive more praise commending me for what I’m trying to do. When we can get mouth-watering flavour and bang-on nutrition from this lifestyle, why shouldn’t we adopt it?”

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