

All vegetarians do not eat seafood. I cannot get sick if I am a vegetarian. A vegetarian diet lacks nutrients.

These are all serious misconceptions about the vegetarian diet. Whether you are interested in becoming, or already are, a vegetarian for health, ethical, or environmental reasons, it is important to clear these misconceptions in order for you to make informed decisions about your lifestyle.

The types of vegetarian diets

The similarity amongst all vegetarian diets is that they include all types of fruit, vegetables, and carbohydrate foods like rice, potatoes, pasta, noodles, cereals, and grains. The main difference between each vegetarian diet is their inclusion of protein foods. Depending on the individual, the type of vegetarian diet has personal variation.

Vegan diet: This is the strictest of the vegetarian diets. Those practicing vegan diets exclude ingredients such as meat, seafood, poultry, eggs and dairy foods. Instead, they consume only soy products, beans, lentils, all types of nuts, and seeds as their protein foods.

Lacto-vegetarian diet: This diet allows dairy foods such as milk, cheese, yoghurt, and cream but still excludes meat, seafood, poultry and eggs.

Lacto-ovo vegetarian diet: This diet allows dairy foods and eggs.

Pescatarian diet: This diet allows seafood in their diet.

The Vegetarian Diet

Clearing misconceptions about vegetarian diets

MYTH #1

Vegetarians will most likely face vitamin-deficiency

Like with every diet, the vegetarian diet has its health pros and cons. However, the cons (including vitamin-deficiency) are easily preventable.

■ The Pros

A vegetarian diet means a much lower intake of red meat compared to those not practicing vegetarianism. This decrease in intake has shown to reduce the risk of some cancers such as colon and breast cancers. Vegetarian diets also increases fibre intake which is positively associated with weight management, better control of blood sugar levels, and high blood pressure. It is necessary to ensure that the daily intake of fat is under control.



■ The Cons & Its Alternative

For vegans, there is a risk of vitamin B12 deficiency. This can easily be solved by getting a vitamin B12 injection once every 6 months. Iron and calcium are two nutrients that can be missing from a vegetarian's diet because the most absorbable forms are found in protein foods such as meat, poultry, seafood and dairy foods. Thankfully, a well-rounded and a satisfactory intake of nutrients and vitamins can prevent deficiencies.

■ The Balanced Diet

A balanced diet is one with adequate amounts of carbohydrate, protein, vitamins, minerals and fibre. Eat from the four main food groups; rice and alternatives, meat and alternatives (in this case it would be beans, nuts, seeds and soy), fruits, and vegetables. Vary the choices everyday to get a wide variety of phytochemicals and nutrients.

These are ingredients that a vegetarian should include in their diet:

- **Beans** of all types (kidney bean, red beans, pinto beans) contain good amounts of zinc, calcium, and iron that are useful for a vegetarian. Although it is not in the most absorbable form, it still plays a role in satisfying the nutritional demands.

- **Dairy foods** such as milk, cheese, or yoghurt are excellent sources of calcium which is best taken in the low fat or skimmed versions. They promote healthy growth and development in children and are great for preventing osteoporosis later on in life.

- **Green vegetables** such as spinach, kai lan, peas and broccoli are high in iron that should be eaten daily to prevent iron deficiency anaemia that is common in vegetarians. Eat a piece of fruit after each meal as the vitamin C in it will enhance iron absorption.

- **Iron or calcium fortified foods** such as iron fortified cereals or calcium fortified orange juice or tofu. They help to meet the daily needs of calcium and iron.

MYTH #2

A vegetarian diet is extremely unsafe for pregnant women

It is safe as long as you are getting adequate amounts of protein, calcium and iron from the foods that are allowed. The safest form would be a lacto-ovo vegetarian diet. If given a choice, it would be advised to be non-vegetarian for the duration of

the pregnancy if that does not infringe on any beliefs or religion. You can resume to a vegetarian diet post pregnancy.

MYTH #3

A vegetarian diet is always healthy

A vegetarian diet is not all that healthy if you are consuming full fat dairy foods and deep-fried foods. Common mistakes are vegetarian fried bee hoon with mock meat dishes, fried tofu, large amounts of nuts and seeds, muesli bars, and snack foods.

MYTH #4

Vegetarians weigh less than non-vegetarians

Not necessarily. Weight management is dependent on how much you eat and how many calories you burn. A vegetarian can still be at risk of being overweight if he/she over-eats carbohydrate or protein foods. ③



Q At what age is it safe to start being a vegetarian?

There is no specified age as the choice of becoming vegetarian is either due to cultural, religious or ethical reasons. If the choice is not because of religion, it is safer to start after the puberty phase to reducing the chances of stunting growth and development. Speak to a dietician before commencing on a vegetarian to ensure that you get an overall well-balanced diet.

This article is written in consultation with **Jaclyn Reutens**, a Clinical Dietitian from Aptima Nutrition & Sports Consultants