

SHOULD CHILDREN EAT VEGAN?



Many parents these days are limiting their children's meat intake. While this may be seen as a good thing, the real question is whether or not veganism should be an option for those under 18 years old. Some people say eating vegan can benefit young children and teenagers especially in terms of health and nutrition but others argue that it simply isn't practical and does more harm than good. Is veganism really all that great? Should we consider it for our kids?

Firstly, let's describe what we mean by "vegan. Veganism is a diet that doesn't include any animal products whatsoever. This means no meat or fish, dairy, eggs or any other animal products such as cheese. Some people think that veganism is limiting and restrictive but it does actually provide a lot of benefits such as a healthier heart, reduced risk of cancer and diabetes, (1) better weight control and increased energy levels.

Many meat-eating parents actually feed their children a vegan diet without realising. For starters they are breast fed. Then when they are being weaned an ideal starter food is mashed fruit or vegetables. These get chunkier as the child grows and develops teeth. Introducing raw fruit and vegetables to chew on eases teething pain but also helps give kids a taste for vegetables. The next stage is often to add eggs (as an easily digested protein) into the mix. Unfortunately, many children are allergic to eggs so their parents continue with the vegetable-based diet.

As a parent that actually following this way of feeding my children I am pleased that both of them were healthy, of a good weight and although I didn't realise they were on a vegan diet at the time, they flourished. They were also well-nourished - taking in lots of vitamins and minerals that helped their

bodies, organs and immune systems develop. I think if you ask most parents this is the diet many children up to the age of 12 months are fed by default.

The main concern with children following a vegan diet is that they will develop normally but to a lower level than their equivalent age group. However, this study (2) found that this isn't true at all. In fact, it says that vegan kids actually grow taller than their meat-eating peers.

One concern is that children raised on a vegan diet will be malnourished. However, this is rare in developed countries and less than 4% of vegan kids were found to be lacking in some nutrients. (3) Being malnourished doesn't necessarily mean underweight; it means a deficiency in one or more nutrients. Vegan diets can be low in Vit B12 and iron as these are two nutrients that usually come from meat. However, this is easily overcome with nutritional yeast, pulses and tofu. (4)

The other thing to bear in mind, an argument often used by vegans, is that the strongest, largest animals on the planet, (elephant, rhino and giraffe) are all herbivores; the animal equivalent of vegan. And they all started off as little teeny tiny babies.

The other nutrient that is often cited as a concern in vegan diets is calcium. Calcium is necessary for bone development so is incredibly important in a child's diet. So isn't it important for kids to drink milk and eat dairy foods so they can grow optimally? Apparently not. You can get just as much bone-beneficial calcium from leafy greens, beans and non-dairy milk as you can from dairy foods (5).

In fact, this research (6) shows vegans have identical levels of bone mineral density as those who eat meat. Having said that, a 2021 study (7) has identified that children between the ages of 5 and 10 tend to be up to 3cm shorter than their meat-eating counterparts. They were also found to have weaker bones. Children are renowned to be picky eaters who don't like eating their vegetables. A little imagination in meal preparation by their parents, could easily overcome this and ensure they grow up strong and healthy.

Aside from physical health, veganism has also been linked to improved mental health (8). After the last couple of years we have had, following the pandemic and lockdowns, kid's mental health would definitely benefit right now from eating less animal products. Not to mention the reduced impact on the environment, which is also very much in the news at the moment (8). Plus there's also some evidence suggesting that children on a vegan diet score better academically (PETA).

One of the main issues in bringing up children, whether they eat meat or not, is getting them to sleep. The good news is that vegan diets can be a great tool when getting your little one settled for the night. This is because proteins from plants are high in something called tryptophan. This is a compound which is a chemical ingredient for melatonin, the sleep hormone (9). It is important to get your children into a good sleep routine and melatonin helps regulate the sleep/wake cycle so get those kiddies eating those veggies.

So if veganism is nutritional healthy for kids as well as emotionally satisfying then why discourage it? Although a vegan diet is typically lower in saturated fat than an omnivorous one, it can be higher in carbohydrates. Kids of all ages (and adults too) love biscuits, cakes, chips, crisps, pizza and pasta. The

problem is these are processed carbs and can pile on the pounds. So it pays to be careful that, as a parent, you don't be tempted to feed your vegan child carb-based meals.

As mentioned, vegan diets are low in saturated fat but on the plus side are packed full of healthy fats full of omega 3. Omega 3 fats are hugely important for brain function so what could be better to support your child as they learn and grow (10). The foods I am talking about include nuts, nut butters, seeds, avocado, tofu and soy.

By now hopefully you're convinced that vegan children are just as happy, healthy and smart as non-vegan children! Now some parents may be worried about how practical it is to raise a child on a vegan diet but it's actually easier than you think. If you want to give it a try start by introducing more vegetables into meals all washed down with non-dairy milk.

So in conclusion there are many benefits associated with raising children on a vegan diet but it is not without its challenges; however most of them can be overcome if you take things slow enough!

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