

WHAT FOODS TO INCLUDE IN A VEGAN DIET



Veganism is a type of vegetarian diet that excludes the consumption of meat and all animal-derived foods. This means no eggs, milk, cheese or butter. The majority of a vegan diet is made up of vegetables and fruits, and therefore veganism is often referred to as a plant-based diet.

Bodybuilding

Meat and fish are the main sources of protein in a regular diet. Protein is essential for the growth and repair of the body so vegans must find a good source of protein.

The best plant-based sources of protein are foods such as beans, lentils, nuts/seeds and soy foods such as tofu, edamame, milk, and tempeh. Quinoa is also a complete protein source that contains all nine essential amino acids your body requires. There are many great resources available for vegans looking to plan their meals around protein-rich foods (1).

Bone health

The other foods missing from a vegan diet are those classed as dairy foods. These are cow's milk and foods made from milk. Dairy foods are one of the main providers of calcium in a regular diet. Calcium is needed for the development and repair of the skeleton so is incredibly important. Vegans often use alternatives such as soy or nut milk which are lower in calorific value than milk. However, many have the same or even a little more calcium which is great news (2).

Another benefit of non-dairy milk is that there is no lactose which can often cause digestive issues.

Other non-dairy sources of calcium are leafy green vegetables like kale, spinach and good old broccoli. Nuts also contain calcium with the best source being almonds. You can get these into your daily diet by substituting sweets with these little kernels of goodness. As mentioned before, beans can help give us vegans our much-needed protein. But white beans in particular have calcium too. We normally think of oranges as being a way of getting Vitamin C into our diet but these gorgeous globes of loveliness also have calcium. Even rhubarb and tomatoes have a little calcium in them. This means if you are eating a varied diet with a wide range of fruit and vegetables you won't go short of calcium (3).

Sunshine vitamin

To enable calcium to be used by the body, vitamin D is necessary (4).

We can get this vitamin from the sunshine during the summer months. The sun doesn't care if you eat meat or not! However, during the dark and dreary days of winter when the sun barely pokes its face from behind the rain clouds, we need to find another source. Vitamin D mainly comes from oily fish. As vegans, fish is off the menu but many nut milks are fortified with vitamin D so are a great source of this vitamin.

Mushrooms are also full of vitamin D. From button to Portobello, shitake to morel they can all help provide this valuable nutrient. And a great tip is to not keep them in the fridge in the dark. Put them on the window sill, as U V light helps the vitamin D develop even more (5).

Something sweet

Most people have a sweet tooth but one thing that may not occur to someone thinking about becoming a vegan is that honey and some sweets are classed as animal products. For instance, animal bones are used in the production of gelatine which is then added into jellies or gummy sweets where it acts as a thickening agent. Honey is produced by bees that work incredibly hard to produce this sticky sweet liquid as food for themselves. Did you know that in the whole of its hard-working (3 month) life, that a bee produces less than half a teaspoon of honey? And we then just help ourselves to it!! Many consider this not worth the cost of an animal's short life when there are other non-animal based sugars (6).

Plant alternatives to honey are maple syrup, molasses or syrups made from dates, coconut, rice or malt. So there are plenty of ways of satisfying your sweet tooth without the guilt (7).

Popeye got it right!

A well-thought-out diet plan is essential for those following a new way of eating as it can be difficult to get enough of some vitamins and minerals. One of those minerals is iron which is incredibly important to enable the body to absorb the oxygen that we breathe in (8). The best way to make sure you get enough of this mineral on a vegan diet is lots of leaf vegetables. Remember Popeye gobbling up lots of spinach? It may have been a children's cartoon but there is a lot of truth in how good spinach is for you. Namely providing iron. Iron is found in fruits like figs, dates and apricots; vegetables including broccoli, green beans and anything with a leaf (even dandelions); beans, lentils and fortified bread and cereals (9).

Cobalamin aka Vitamin B12

Vitamin B12 is one of the more tricky vitamins to replace in a vegan diet. The main source is meat but even omnivores can have low B12 due to poor absorption. This means a 6 weekly trip to the doctor to get an injection. Having said that, one study (10) did find that Vitamin B12 from fortified foods like cereals was better absorbed than B12 from meat sources. One reason for this is that B12 is destroyed by cooking meat.

Fatty Acid numero #3

Finally, Omega 3 is an incredibly important nutrient that boosts the brain and is needed to keep disease at bay. Despite being a (healthy) fat, it is great at reducing inflammation. The best plant sources of Omega 3 are nuts and seeds. The best ones being flax seeds and flax oil; hemp, chia and pumpkin seeds (11).

Nuts and seeds can have higher levels of Omega 6, which is inflammatory, so don't go too mad on the cashew butter on toast!

A vegan diet is full of wonders - from sweet things to keep your taste buds happy to leafy green vegetables that give you more than Popeye's muscles. With a bit of planning, changing to this way of eating can be a great way to boost your health and longevity, for every stage of life (12).

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