

# Vegetarian Diets for Children- Topic of the Month

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Parents that follow a vegetarian lifestyle may choose to offer the same diet to their children. At WIC, our role is to assess intake and educate appropriately to ensure these children receive adequate nutrition that supports their rapid growth and development.

## Vegetarian diets & children

Vegetarian diets consist of mostly plant-based foods and exclude meat and poultry. These diets can be healthy for children but may be deficient in some key nutrients such as vitamin B12 and iron. Parents need to be sure their child's diet contains the essential nutrients and adequate caloric intake needed to ensure they are getting what they need to grow and thrive.

### Types of Vegetarian Diets

- **Vegetarian:** May or may not include dairy products or eggs.
- **Lacto-ovo-vegetarian:** Includes dairy products and eggs.
- **Pescatarian:** Includes fish and seafood, may include dairy products and eggs.
- **Lacto-vegetarian:** Includes dairy products, but not eggs.
- **Ovo-vegetarian:** Includes eggs and egg products, but no dairy.
- **Vegan:** Excludes all animal products, may exclude honey.
  - **NOTE:** The American Pediatric Association recommends that children only be on this diet after consultation with their health care provider.
- **Raw vegan:** Based on vegetables, fruit, nuts and seeds, legumes, and sprouted grains. Foods are primarily if not all uncooked.

The 2016 [Position of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics: Vegetarian Diets](#) reports that when nutritionally balanced, this dietary choice is appropriate for all stages of the life cycle. When followed correctly, these diets can reduce risks of certain health conditions and chronic disease. Additionally, plant-based diets are environmentally sustainable since they use lower levels of natural resources in production and cause less environmental damage and waste.

## WIC's Role

So, how can we ensure participants make vegetarian dietary choices that are nutritionally adequate for their children?

- We can listen for indicators of a diet rich in fruits and vegetables, beans and peas, nuts and seeds, and whole grains foods. These indicators can help ensure adequate caloric intake and nutrient balance.
- We can effectively assess the participants dietary intake with the tools available to us.
  - The [Training Tools for Nutrition Assessment](#) aids in determining the quality of intake and identify gaps in dietary choices.
  - Participant Center Services ([PCS Counseling Skills](#)) help us to carefully navigate participants' feeling, motivation, and goals associated with eating habits.

A quality assessment includes the use of counseling skills that promotes sharing, probes for more information, elicits change talk, and ultimately provides education and resources that support goal setting.

## Assessment

During the nutrition assessment, consider how participants are getting enough of the following nutrients.

- **B12:** Eggs, dairy products, fortified soy beverage and soy-based products, and some fortified breakfast cereals.
- **Iron:** Soy products, dry beans and peas, dark green leafy vegetables, iron enriched breads, WIC cereals; also, peanut butter and some dried fruits, nuts and seeds. (Although a caution should be included to avoid choking)
- **Healthy Fat:** Eggs, nuts, flax or chia seeds, avocado, and plant-based oils.
- **Protein:** Dry beans, soy and soy products, eggs, dairy products, peanut butter, nuts, and seeds. (Provide choking precautions)
- **Vitamin D:** Milk, fortified soy and nut beverages, fortified breakfast cereal and vitamin D-fortified orange juice.
- **Calcium:** Fortified soy or nut beverages, calcium-set tofu, dairy products, kale, bok choy, Chinese cabbage, broccoli, and some fortified cereals and juices.
- **Zinc:** Soy products, dry beans, whole grain foods, wheat germ, cheese, seeds and nuts and zinc-fortified cereals.
- **Iodine:** Iodized table salt, some sea vegetables, and dairy products.

## Goals for healthy dietary intake

There are measures to assess that a child is getting the appropriate amount of caloric intake and that their diet is supporting optimal growth and development. Consider if:

- The child is growing at a normal rate.
- The child is getting a nutritionally adequate diet.

- The child is eating a variety of healthy foods.

## Common concerns

- **Adequate iron and B12 intake**
  - Iron deficiency is by far the most common cause of anemia in children and women of childbearing age. Anemia can impair energy metabolism, temperature regulation, and immune function; even mild anemia may delay mental and motor development in children.
  - Vitamin B12 deficiency is possible with those who avoid animal-based foods. B12 is needed for many things in the body; it is especially important in the production of DNA, nerves, and red blood cells. Long-term deficiency can lead to anemia, unusual fatigue, developmental delays, cognitive difficulties, and irreversible neurological damage.
- **Adequate caloric intake**
  - A diet high in simple carbohydrates may include many foods high in sugar and lack nutrient rich caloric intake.
  - A diet that only includes fruits and vegetables limits adequate calories and falls short in fat, protein, complex carbohydrates and various nutrients.
  - Have a plan. Plan ahead to avoid deficiencies and ensure that meals and snacks meet the requirements for nutrients and calories.
- **Appropriate fiber intake**
  - Too much fiber can fill up some children quickly. If an issue, parents may use some refined grains, such as fortified cereals, breads and pasta; peel the skin on some fruits; serve some cooked vegetables instead of raw; and provide frequent meals and snacks.

## Assigning risk

Once the CPA gathers information from the participant about their eating behaviors, that information is used to determine any dietary risks.

- For a diet consistently lacking essential nutrients and calories, use: Women 427B for pregnant or breastfeeding women, 425F for children, and 411H for Infants.
- If the diet is rich in essential nutrients and does not restrict calories, consider specific risk code(s) based on the complete assessment: see [WIC Risk Criteria](#) 400-428 for more information.

It is important to address concerns about potential nutrition deficiencies (risk) without sounding judgmental to the families' choices. If a referral is needed, be sure to ask permission and share what you are referring for and why. After identifying the participant's interest or motivation toward change, create an open environment by honoring their choices with affirmations and show support for goals they may set for themselves of their family.

## Resources for families

Once asking for permission to share, suggest resources that may help support sound dietary choices.

- [Building a Healthy Vegetarian Diet: Myths and Facts](#): The Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics helps to dispel some common myths about vegetarianism.
- [Vegetarian Diets](#): KidsHealth is a great resource that provides a breakdown of the different types of vegetarian diets as well as specific nutrient for infants and toddlers.
- [Oldways Vegetarian & Vegan Diet](#): Oldways covers cultural food traditions surrounding plant-based diets around the world. Includes many nutritious recipes with a search list based on ingredients.
- [Enjoy Vegetarian Meals](#): MyPlate provides some tips for nutrients to focus on and optional food choices families may enjoy.

Please forward any future topic suggestions to [Carole.Kelnhofer@state.mn.us](mailto:Carole.Kelnhofer@state.mn.us).

## References- Complete listing of hyperlinks:

[Position of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics: Vegetarian Diets \(higherlogicdownload.s3.amazonaws.com/THEACADEMY/859dd171-3982-43db-8535-56c4fdc42b51/UploadedImages/VN/Documents/Position-of-the-Academy-of-Nutrition-and-Dietetics-Vegetarian-Diets.pdf\)](#)

[Training Tools for Nutrition Assessment \(www.health.state.mn.us/people/wic/localagency/training/na.html#tools\)](#)

[PCS Counseling Skills \(www.health.state.mn.us/people/wic/localagency/training/pcs/skills/counseling.html\)](#)

[WIC Risk Criteria \(www.health.state.mn.us/people/wic/localagency/riskcodes/index.html\)](#)

[Building a Healthy Vegetarian Diet: Myths and Facts \(www.eatright.org/health/wellness/vegetarian-and-plant-based/building-a-healthy-vegetarian-diet-myths\)](#)

[Vegetarian Diets \(kidshealth.org/en/parents/vegetarianism.html\)](#)

[Oldways Vegetarian & Vegan Diet \(oldwayspt.org/traditional-diets/vegetarian-vegan-diet\)](#)

[Enjoy Vegetarian Meals \(www.myplate.gov/tip-sheet/enjoy-vegetarian-meals\)](#)

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