

# Making the Change to a Vegetarian Diet

If your usual eating pattern has often included animal foods, and you are ready to move toward vegetarian alternatives, the suggestions below may help ease the transition.

There are many different ways to plan a healthy vegetarian diet. The most important rule is to include a wide variety of whole grains, legumes, vegetables and fruits in different meals. Nuts and seeds may be included, too. Lacto-ovo vegetarians also choose to include eggs and low-fat dairy products in their diet. Vegans omit all products derived from animals.

Vegetarian diets may include familiar foods—such as cereals, bean soup, potatoes, peanut butter sandwiches and spaghetti—as well as the less familiar—such as bulgur, adzuki beans, TVP (textured vegetable protein, derived from soy), and soymilk. Experimentation with new foods can provide nutritional benefits as well as enhance your eating enjoyment.

## Foods to Ease the Transition

Some foods made from soybeans, wheat protein and other vegetable sources, can ease the change to a vegetarian diet because they mimic meat and dairy products in the diet. Meat analogs are made to look and taste like different types of meat. Some mimic sausages, hot dogs, hamburgers, or chicken patties. Soymilk, soy yogurt, and soy cheese are available for people who don't use dairy products or who wish to add some variety to their diet. Tofu can be pureed and seasoned to make a filling for lasagna or stuffed shells. Textured vegetable protein (TVP) has the look and texture of ground beef and can be used to make sloppy joes, spaghetti sauce, or tacos.

## A Gradual Approach is Easiest

Some people decide to trade in their usual diet for a vegetarian plan all at once. Others prefer a more gradual approach. This allows a comfortable transition and allows time to find plenty of new ways to meet nutrient needs. The goal is to make changes that you can live with and which are nutritionally sound. The following plan outlines an easy transition to a vegetarian diet.

### 1. Take stock of your current diet.

- Make a list of the foods and menus that you normally eat.
- Identify the foods and meals that are vegetarian, and build from these as a foundation.
- Some examples include spaghetti with marinara sauce, bean burritos, or cheese sandwiches.
- Plan to eat a vegetarian meal several times a week using foods you know and enjoy.

### 2. Add more vegetarian meals by revising favorite recipes that are meat-based.

For example, chili can be made using beans, TVP or tofu in place of ground beef. The beef in spaghetti sauce can be replaced with TVP or sauteed vegetables.

### 3. Expand your options by finding new recipes in cookbooks and trying different products from the store.

Many vegetarian meals can be made without a recipe or without much time invested in the kitchen. Try seasoned rice mixes, spaghetti with sauce from a jar, vegetable chow mein, burritos with canned refried beans, vegetarian baked beans with rice. Try various brands of veggie burgers and meatless hot dogs.

### 4. Make a list of vegetarian meals that you can eat away from home.

- Inventory your options at the cafeteria, nearby restaurants, carry-outs, and convenience stores. Look for vegetarian soups, salad bars, pasta salads, pasta primavera, vegetable pizza, and baked potatoes. Chinese, Thai, Indian, and Middle Eastern restaurants have numerous vegetarian entrees. Choices from a convenience store may include a bean burrito or a microwavable frozen entree.
- Plan vegetarian meals to go, using leftovers from a home-cooked or restaurant meal. Other vegetarian brown bag ideas include bean or vegetable soup in a thermos, peanut butter and banana sandwiches, bean dip with pita bread or crackers, or cheese with bread and fruit.

### 5. Eliminate meat at breakfast.

Try some of the meat analogs that look and taste like bacon or sausage, to make the change easier.

### 6. Take stock of your menu once again.

Do your meals include . . .

- a variety of grains, legumes and soy products, vegetables and fruits? (Aim for 2 to 3 servings of legumes and other meat alternates daily.)
- some fresh fruits and vegetables daily? (Aim for 5 to 9 servings/day.)
- primarily whole grains with little processing? (Aim for 6 to 11 servings/day.)
- low-fat dairy products, if following a lacto-ovo vegetarian or lacto vegetarian plan? (Aim for 2-3 servings/day.)

If not, make a list of ways to add more of these foods.

## If You Don't Eat Dairy Foods

Calcium is found in a wide variety of plant foods. It is easy to obtain adequate calcium without including dairy foods. If you choose to eliminate dairy from your diet, it is a good idea to first identify other foods that provide calcium and to start including them in meals. Some good choices are calcium-fortified soymilk, calcium-fortified cereals, calcium-fortified juice, tofu, tempeh, TVP, leafy green vegetables, broccoli, Chinese cabbage (bok choy), vegetarian baked beans, almond butter, figs, and tahini.

## If You Don't Eat Eggs

A variety of foods can replace eggs in a recipe, depending on the dish. Applesauce, mashed bananas, prune puree, soymilk, yogurt, juice, or water can replace the moisture eggs provide in baked goods, but not necessarily their binding qualities. Powdered egg replacer (primarily potato starch) works in muffins and other baked goods. Some commercial fat replacer products also successfully replace eggs. Rolled oats, pureed beans, tofu, or ground flaxseed all work well as binding agents in vegetable patties. Adapting recipes to egg-free versions requires some experimentation. Vegan cookbooks provide recipes developed without eggs.

## Meal Planning Made Easy

Most people think of meat first when it comes to menu planning. Instead of thinking about a "meat replacement" think in terms of a wide variety of entrees. The center of a meal can be a favorite soup, sandwich or casserole. Grains should play the biggest role in the diet so consider grain-based entrees as often as possible, such as soup with macaroni, barley or rice, a noodle casserole, or herb-flavored rice or pasta. Then add vegetables, fruits, beans (and nuts or seeds if desired) to complete the meal.

### Some Tips For Introducing Variety Into Vegetarian Meals

- **Aim for variety**, even when you serve favorite entrees over and over again, by serving different side dishes, snacks and desserts.
- **Be creative in planning meals.** Increase intake of beans and vegetables by eating these foods at lunch time rather than just for dinner. Make it a goal to serve a vegetable every day for lunch and two for dinner.
- **If beans are a new addition to your menus, introduce them gradually** by having a few spoonfuls on a salad, a small cup of bean soup at lunch, or a bean casserole at dinner. Puree beans with herbs, lemon juice or other seasonings to create a sandwich spread or dip. A mixture of lentils or beans with rice, onions, parsley and vegetables makes a colorful main dish salad, with the dressing of your choice.
- **Plan a meal around a vegetable.** A baked potato can be a hearty entree; serve it with baked beans, a sauce of stewed tomatoes or a few tablespoons of salsa. Or make a simple meal of sauteed vegetables and pasta.
- **Try new foods often.** Experiment with a variety of grains such as quinoa, couscous, bulgur, barley, and wheat berries. Try fruits and vegetables that are popular in different international cuisines, such as bok choy and sea vegetables (e.g. nori, kombu, hiziki, etc.).

## To Ensure Healthy Eating

Variety is the best insurance that your diet will be healthy.

- **Accentuate the positive.** Focus more on healthy foods that fit into a vegetarian plan instead of foods to avoid.
- **Base your diet on plant foods.** Eating too much milk, cheese and yogurt may raise the fat content of the diet and displace fiber-rich foods. Once you are past the initial transition phase and have made the change to vegetarianism, use low fat and skim dairy foods in moderation, not as the center of meals.
- **Be relaxed about protein.** As long as calories are sufficient and the diet is varied, vegetarians easily meet protein needs. Grains, beans, vegetables, and nuts all provide protein. It isn't necessary to have a "high-protein" food like cheese, soy, beans, or meat analogs at each meal. Vegetarians do not need to eat special combinations of foods to meet protein needs.
- **Be aware of fat.** Even vegetarians can get too much fat if the diet contains large amounts of nuts, oils, processed foods, sweets, margarine, salad dressings, high fat dairy products, or eggs.

## Resources

Davis B, Melina V. *Becoming Vegan*. Summertown, Tennessee: Book Publishing Co.; 2000.

Melina V, Davis B, Harrison V. *Becoming Vegetarian*. Summertown, Tennessee: Book Publishing Company, 1995.

Messina M, Messina V. *The Dietitian's Guide to Vegetarian Diets: Issues and Applications*. Gaithersburg, Maryland: Aspen Publishers, Inc., 1996.

Messina V, Messina M. *The Vegetarian Way*. New York: Crown Publishers, 1996.

Wasserman D, Mangels R. *Simply Vegan*, 3rd ed. Baltimore, Maryland: The Vegetarian Resource Group, 1999.

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