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Hangzhou Comtrue-Building a Healthy Vegetarian Meal:

Myths and Facts

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Vegetarian meals are gaining in popularity — even with regular meat-eaters. Forty-seven percent of Americans eat at least one vegetarian meal per week, according to a recent poll by the Vegetarian Resource Group. That's up 15 percent from similar data 10 years ago.

As more and more individuals reduce their carnivorous ways, one essential question remains: Are vegetarian and vegan diets healthy? The answer is yes. If appropriately planned, vegetarian or vegan diets can be healthful, nutritionally adequate, and may provide health benefits in the prevention and treatment of certain diseases.

But many myths still surround the health implications of a vegetarian diet. See what the facts are when it comes to plant-based diets.

As meat has become synonymous with protein, many consumers struggle to identify non-meat sources of this dietary building block. But adequate protein needs are easily attained through a well-planned diet. And, plant-based protein typically contains more fiber and less fat, both cornerstones of a heart-healthy diet. There are many versatile plant-based sources of protein that fit into a healthy eating plan: legumes (beans and peas), soy products, whole grains, nuts and (for lacto-ovo vegetarians) low-fat or fat-free dairy and eggs. Vegans should consume more protein than their meat and dairy-eating counterparts. That's "because protein from whole grains and legumes has lower digestibility than animal protein," says Reed Mangels, PhD, RD. Plant foods are encased in cellulose cell walls, which are hard to penetrate and digest. For familiar, high-protein vegan options, try bean burritos, vegetable and hummus wraps, or bean chili.

Dairy is not the only food source that can help protect your bones. "A number of nutrients are needed for bone health, including calcium, vitamin D and protein," says Mangels. Each of these nutrients can be found in plant foods such as kale, broccoli, bok choy, calcium-set tofu and fortified soymilk. Some vegetables like spinach and rhubarb are good sources of calcium, but they are also high in oxalates, which decrease calcium absorption, so include a wide variety of other green vegetables more often.

If you are forgoing dairy, ensure that you get the recommended daily 1,000 mg of calcium by spreading your green vegetable intake throughout the day and choosing calcium-fortified foods such as non-dairy milk, ready-to-eat cereals, orange juice and tofu. In addition to following a nutrient-rich diet, weight-bearing exercise such as yoga, running, walking and strength training is an essential component for increasing bone strength.



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For vegans and vegetarians, incorporating soy in the diet is an easy way to meet both protein and calcium requirements. Despite news reports to the contrary, there is no proven soy-cancer link. "Soy doesn't appear to have any effect on risk for breast cancer one way or the other," says Ginny Messina, MPH, RD. In fact, she says, "there is evidence that girls who consume soy in childhood and adolescence have a lower lifetime risk for breast cancer; soy in adulthood doesn't appear to have that effect." No matter what your diet preference, variety is key. Swapping animal-based protein for soy is a good way to add variety to your meals. Aim for whole food sources like soybeans, tempeh, edamame and tofu.

A well-planned vegetarian or vegan diet can meet the nutrient needs of people from all stages of life, including pregnant and lactating women, children, and even athletes. It's just about making sure you get the nutrients you need. Pregnant women, for example, need more iron. So expectant mothers should eat plenty of iron-rich foods and include a source of vitamin C to help increase absorption (iron is not absorbed well from plant-based sources). Try these iron and vitamin C combinations: beans and salsa, broccoli and tofu, black-eyed peas and collard greens.

For infants, children and adolescents, a vegetarian diet can promote normal growth. As with adults, vegan children may have slightly higher protein needs because of how the body digests plant protein. However, these needs typically can be fulfilled if the diet provides enough calories and diversity of foods.

And while most competitive athletes require increased energy, protein and nutrient needs for optimal performance, there's no reason that they can't get everything they need nutritionally from plant sources. All it takes is a little diligence in menu planning.

The "vegetarian" or "vegan" label doesn't automatically equal good health. While some cookies, chips and sweetened cereal might be vegetarian foods, they are also likely high in sugar and unhealthy fats. Meatless eaters might find it easy to load up on processed foods like veggie burgers, but those items aren't necessarily any healthier than their animal counterpart. And cheese, while a good source of calcium, also contains saturated fat and cholesterol. So what is the best way to assure a food is a good choice? Read the label. Look for low levels of saturated fat, cholesterol and sodium. These key nutrition label components are much better indicators of a food's health than whether or not it is vegetarian. Being a healthy vegetarian eater means loading up on veggies, fruits, whole grains and lean proteins.

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