Vegetarian Nutrition

Vegetarians can rest assured. Plant-based foods are loaded with nutrients including ample protein, iron, calcium, vitamin D, zinc, iodine, and omega-3’s. Vegans require a reliable source of vitamin B12.

Whether you eat a vegetarian or non-vegetarian diet, the key to health is simple. Include a wide variety of different foods in your diet—no one food source is nutritionally complete by itself.

Vegetarians choose foods from grains, vegetables, legumes, nuts, seeds and fruits. Whole unrefined foods are best. Eggs and dairy are optional. On a plant-based diet, you will have the distinct advantage of obtaining nutrients from sources high in fibre, and low in saturated fat and cholesterol.

Protein

Most people can easily meet their protein needs by eating a variety of whole grains, legumes, and vegetables on a daily basis. Although there is somewhat less protein in a vegetarian diet, this is actually an advantage, as excess protein has been linked to heart disease, cancer, kidney disease and osteoporosis. Foods high in protein include tofu, tempeh, beans, nuts, seeds, soy milk, some vegetables (such as broccoli, asparagus, spinach, snowpeas, Brussels sprouts), eggs, and dairy products. Also see “Protein Myth” below.

Iron

Only about one fifth of the iron in a standard diet comes from meat. Dairy products are deficient in iron. The richest plant sources are dark green vegetables, soy products and legumes, whole grains, dried fruits, nuts, seeds, and unrefined molasses. Cooking with cast-iron pots also contributes to dietary intake. Adding fruits and vegetables high in vitamin C to your meals (such as citrus, peppers, cabbage, broccoli, kale or tomatoes) enhances iron absorption. Foods that decrease absorption include: tea, coffee, milk products, spinach, rhubarb, Swiss chard and chocolate.

Calcium

Dairy products are high in calcium, but needs can also be met on a well-planned vegan diet. Rich plant food sources include dark green vegetables such as broccoli, bok choy and kale, beans, tofu (made with calcium), tahini, sesame seeds, almonds, figs, seaweeds, unrefined molasses, and fortified soy milks. Since the consumption of animal protein increases calcium requirements, a person following a vegan diet may have much lower needs. Although some plant foods contain oxalates and phytate which can inhibit calcium absorption, the calcium in plant foods is generally well absorbed.

Vitamin D

This vitamin is essential for the absorption of calcium and is formed in the presence of direct or indirect sunlight. Your body stores vitamin D during the summer for winter use. On average, about 10 to 15 minutes a day of sun on the face and hands for light-skinned people should suffice. Darker-skinned people, the elderly, and those at higher latitudes may need more sun exposure. Sunscreen lotion rated SPF 8 or above prevents vitamin D synthesis. Dairy products and some soy milks are fortified with vitamin D. People getting insufficient sun or not eating fortified foods should consider taking a daily multiple vitamin with 400 IU of vitamin D.

...continued on back

Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine

Protein is an important nutrient required for the building, maintenance, and repair of tissues in the body. Amino acids, the building blocks of protein, can be synthesized by the body or ingested from food. A variety of grains, legumes, and vegetables can provide all of the essential amino acids our bodies require.

It was once thought that various plant foods had to be eaten together to get their full protein value, otherwise known as protein combining or protein complementing. Intentional combining is not necessary to obtain all of the essential amino acids. As long as the diet contains a variety of grains, legumes, and vegetables, protein needs are easily met.

Protein Requirements

With the traditional Western diet, the average person consumes about double the protein her or his body needs. Additionally, the main sources of protein consumed tend to be animal products which are also high in fat and saturated fat. Most individuals are surprised to learn that protein needs are actually much less than what they have been consuming.

Protein needs are increased for women who are pregnant or breastfeeding. In addition, needs are also higher for active persons. As these groups require additional calories, increased protein needs can easily be met through larger intake of food consumed daily.

The Problems with High-Protein Diets

High protein diets for weight loss, disease prevention, and enhanced athletic performance have been greatly publicized over recent years. However, these diets are supported by little scientific research. Studies show that the healthiest diet is one that is high-carbohydrate, low-fat, and moderate in protein. Increased intake of whole grains, fruits, and vegetables are recommended for weight control and preventing diseases such as cancer and heart disease. High-carbohydrate, low-fat, moderate-protein diets are also recommended for optimal athletic performance. A diet high in protein can actually contribute to disease and other health problems.

...continued on back
Iodine
Regular iodized salt is fortified with plenty of iodine, but if you use sea salt instead, be sure your diet includes a reliable source. Sea salt contains very little iodine. The best sources are seaweed, vegetables grown near the ocean, and supplements. Also some breads use dough stabilizers that contain iodine. Iodine is needed for the normal metabolism of cells.

Omega-3 fatty acids
ALA (Alpha-linolenic acid) is found mainly in the oil of flaxseeds, hemp seeds, walnuts, rapeseed (canola) oil, and soybeans. ALA reduces blood clotting, and is good for the heart. The body converts some of the ALA into two other essential omega-3 fats called EPA and DHA. These two are also found to a small degree in seaweeds, and there are vegan DHA supplements available made from micro-algae. Low levels of DHA have been associated with depression. A tablespoon of ground flaxseeds or a teaspoon of flax oil per day will meet the needs of most people.

Weight Loss Sabotage. Many individuals see almost immediate weight loss as a result of following a high-protein diet. In fact, the weight loss is not a result of consuming more protein, but by simply consuming less calories. As with any temporary diet, weight gain is often seen when previous eating habits are resumed. To achieve permanent weight loss while promoting optimal health, the best strategy is a low-fat diet of grains, legumes, fruits, and vegetables combined with regular physical activity.

Protein Myth continued...

Osteoporosis. Diets that are rich in protein, especially animal protein, are known to cause people to excrete more calcium than normal through their urine and increase the risk of osteoporosis. Plant-based diets provide adequate protein, and calcium (see reverse side) that can help protect against osteoporosis.

Cancer. Although fat is the dietary substance most often singled out for increasing one’s risk for cancer, animal protein also plays a role. Specifically, certain proteins present in meat, fish, and poultry, cooked at high temperatures, especially grilling and frying, have been found to produce compounds called heterocyclic amines. These substances have been linked to various cancers including those of the colon and breast.

A diet rich in whole grains, fruits, and vegetables is a healthful, nutritionally adequate, and provide health benefits in the prevention and treatment of certain diseases.” — Dietitians Of Canada

“Appropriately planned vegetarian diets are healthful, nutritionally adequate, and provide health benefits in the prevention and treatment of certain diseases.”

Protein Myth continued...

Osteoporosis. Diets that are rich in protein, especially animal protein, are known to cause people to excrete more calcium than normal through their urine and increase the risk of osteoporosis. Plant-based diets provide adequate protein, and calcium (see reverse side) that can help protect against osteoporosis.

Cancer. Although fat is the dietary substance most often singled out for increasing one’s risk for cancer, animal protein also plays a role. Specifically, certain proteins present in meat, fish, and poultry, cooked at high temperatures, especially grilling and frying, have been found to produce compounds called heterocyclic amines. These substances have been linked to various cancers including those of the colon and breast.

A diet rich in whole grains, fruits, and vegetables is important in decreasing cancer risk.

Kidney Disease. When people eat too much protein, it releases nitrogen into the blood or is digested and metabolized. This places a strain on the kidneys which must expel the waste through the urine. Kidney problems may result in individuals who are susceptible to disease.

Cardiovascular Disease. Diets high in fat and saturated fat can increase one’s risk of heart disease. High-protein diets often encourage consumption of meat, eggs, and dairy products, which are all high in cholesterol, fat, and saturated fat. The most popular of the high-protein diets have been described as containing excessive amounts of these artery-clogging products. Adequate protein can be consumed through a variety of plant products which are cholesterol-free and contain only small amounts of fat.

Vitamin B12
Very low B12 intakes can cause anemia and nervous system damage. Meat-eaters acquire B12 through micro-organisms in the animal flesh they eat. Lacto-ovo vegetarians receive B12 through eggs and dairy products. The only reliable vegan sources of B12 are foods fortified with B12 (including some rice and soy milks, and some breakfast cereals), B12 supplements and some multi-vitamins. In the past some non-animal items such as spirulina, tempeh, miso, and soil were considered as possible sources, but these have proven to be unreliable. In the absence of any apparent dietary supply, deficiency symptoms usually take five years or more to develop in adults, though some people experience problems within a year. Long term studies of vegans have detected a very low rate of B12 deficiency. Some people (including meat-eaters) have problems absorbing B12. It’s especially important for women to ensure adequate B12 intake when pregnant or breastfeeding.

All other essential vitamins, minerals, fats and carbohydrates are widely found in the plant kingdom. These nutrients can be easily obtained by maintaining variety in a plant food diet.

When you have difficulty adapting to a vegetarian diet it may be that your body needs a few months to adjust and detoxify. Try experimenting with a variety of foods and cooking methods. If you have concerns about a nutrient deficiency, you can always have your blood tested, but rest assured that a varied vegetarian diet lacks no nutrients and is proven to be a powerful health promoting choice. Bon appetit!

See www.veg.ca/living for more information, updates and links.

Reviewed by Anne-Marie Roy R.D.