

# VEGETARIAN DIETS

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**M**any people the world around -- athletes and non-athletes -- restrict or avoid animal products for religious, cultural, or health-related reasons. Millions of others have no choice -- it's plant foods or starve. But there are those who choose vegetarian diets because they believe they are healthier.

Is a vegetarian diet "healthy"? An easier question to answer might be, does a vegetarian diet provide all the nutrients the body needs? Answer: It depends on the type of vegetarian diet. If this appears to be a non-answer, it's because like most other diets, there are many factors involved.

## **TYPES OF DIETS**

The term "vegetarian" is loosely used and doesn't mean one who sits down to a bowl of greens -- and that's all -- at every meal. There are at least six types of vegetarian regimens that one can follow:

**Fruitarian:** Diet consists of raw or dried fruits, nuts, seeds, honey, and vegetable or olive oil.

**Vegan or Pure Vegetarian:** All-vegetable diet without any animal foods, milk products, or eggs.

**Lactovegetarian:** All-vegetable diet plus milk and milk products.

**Lacto-Ovovegetarian:** All-vegetable diet plus milk products and eggs.

**Semivegetarian:** Vegetable diet plus some groups of animal products.

**New Vegetarian:** Vegetable diet plus some groups of animal products, but emphasis is placed on foods that are "organic," "natural," and unprocessed or unrefined.

Even though most athletes still prefer meals that include meat, fowl, or fish, well-planned vegetarian diets will not hurt one's performance. But they must be well planned. While it is impossible to compare by ages of



## **VEGETARIAN DIETS (cont.)**

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the world, Ancient Greek athletes trained on vegetarian diets and displayed amazing ability in competitive athletics. In Sparta, the basic diet was barley, wheat bread, porridge, fruits, vegetables, olive oil, honey, eggs, and goat cheese...a lacto-ovovegetarian diet.

### **MISSING NUTRIENTS**

The major concern about vegetarian diets has always been the question of missing nutrients. If care is taken to include a wide variety of allowed foods and to combine the right foods, vegetarian diets, except the fruitarian diet, can be nutritionally adequate. Because eggs, milk, and cheese are rich in protein, vitamins and minerals, the lacto-ovo and lactovegetarian diets are quite similar in nutrient content to diets containing meat. Such diets can supply all the nutrients needed for good health and good performance.

The strict or "pure" vegetarian needs to find other sources of a few missing nutrients to maintain good health and keep performance level up. Vitamin B12 is not found in plant foods, animal products being the only food

source of this vitamin. The pure vegetarian not eating animal products should use soybean milk fortified with vitamin B12 or a B12 supplement. Diets that don't include meat or milk (or milk products) are also usually low in calcium, iron, zinc, riboflavin, and vitamin D.

Another nutrient that can be lacking in vegetarian diets is protein. Protein is made up of amino acids. Some the body can make, some it cannot. Those the body can't make are called "essential amino acids" because they have to be obtained from food. A food that does not have all of the essential amino acids is called an incomplete protein. Foods of animal origin are complete proteins; most foods of plant origin are incomplete. Incomplete proteins differ from one another according to the amino acids they lack or have in short supply.

Foods of plant origin which lack certain essential amino acids may, in turn, have those that other plant foods are missing. The amino acids from the different sources complement each other to make a complete protein. For example, legumes, which include some beans and peas but not all, are low in two amino acids in which rice has

a sufficiency. Rice is low in two which legumes have. Therefore, beans and rice complement each other and, when combined, supply the essential amino acids.

Clearly, vegetarians abound in every region of the world today. Many, as previously stated, are vegetarians because they have no choice, since plant foods are all they have to eat.

Athletes participating in vigorous training programs often require 3000 to 6000 kcal daily and therefore may need six to eight meals or snacks a day to maintain weight and energy levels. They need an adequate amount of all amino acids at the same time (same meal or snack) to provide all the protein that is useful to the body.

They also need to eat a variety of foods, such as vegetables, fruits, cereals, breads, seeds, nuts, milk, and eggs to obtain all the needed nutrients.

But whether in business, the professions, or in world-class athletics, being a vegetarian does not diminish the natural talent of an individual. Vegetarians simply need a little more knowledge and must put more thought and planning into their diet.