

SCIENCE UPDATE

VEGAN DIETS

risks vs rewards

Plant-based eating is booming – but if you're contemplating a vegan lifestyle, be well prepared to meet all your body's nutritional needs.

More than two million Aussies say their diet is now vegetarian (or almost vegetarian), and among these, Australia is the third fastest-growing vegan nation in the world. So perhaps it's not surprising that vegan diets are no longer seen as extreme. However, if you're new to, or are considering, plant-based eating, what are the nutrients that you need to give special attention?



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Meat-free benefits

A plant-based diet has a lot going for it on the health front, with such diets linked to lower risk of obesity, type 2 diabetes, heart disease and some cancers, as well as increased longevity.

A positive feature of vegan diets – which unlike vegetarian diets also exclude any byproducts of animals such as milk and eggs – is that with good planning, they can meet all the nutritional needs of almost anyone. A key vegan dietary benefit is that such foods tend to be rich in many nutrients. Typically, compared to non-vegetarians, you'll be eating more fibre along with more thiamin, folate, magnesium, and vitamins A, C, and E.

Nutrients to watch out for

On the other hand, there are potential dangers involved, especially if you're removing meat and not replacing it with suitable alternatives. People following a vegan diet should ensure they get enough of the following four key nutrients.

Iron

The iron in plant foods is not as well absorbed as that found in animal foods. So people following a vegan diet need almost double the recommended amount of iron that non-vegetarians require.

However, a varied, plant-based diet can easily provide an adequate iron intake. Good plant sources of iron include legumes, tofu, nuts and

Did you know?
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seeds, whole grains, quinoa, fortified cereals, dried fruits and dark-green leafy vegetables.

Eating vitamin C-rich foods such as citrus fruits or broccoli with meals will help boost iron absorption.

Vitamin B12

This is a significant nutrient of concern for vegans as it's mainly found only in animal foods. Vitamin B12 is important for nerve transmission and blood cell formation. Eating foods that are labelled as fortified with vitamin B12 – such as some soy milks – is one way to get B12. Otherwise, give serious thought to taking a vitamin B12 supplement, and have your doctor keep an eye on your blood levels.

Calcium

The absence of dairy foods in a vegan diet make calcium another nutrient of concern. Calcium is important not just for bone health but for vascular, muscle, and nerve function. Good plant sources of calcium include calcium-fortified soy or almond milk, tofu set with calcium sulfate, almonds and a range of leafy green vegetables.

Omega-3 fats

These fatty acids are essential for your immune system – and because you can't make them, you have to get them in foods. With fish and their omega-3 fats off the vegan menu, you can go some way to meeting your needs through plant sources such as walnuts, flaxseeds, chia seeds or soybean oil.

The bottom line

As with any dietary pattern, a vegan diet can be healthy or unhealthy depending on the types of nutrient-rich or poor foods that make up a menu. If you ensure your vegan diet is varied, balanced and carefully planned, you can meet your nutrient needs throughout life – and reap a host of health benefits into the bargain. hfg

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