So Your Child Wants to Be Vegetarian

Your child just told you they want to stop eating meat. Your first reaction might be, is that a good idea?

Can you give a vegetarian child all the nutrition they need for healthy development? Will it stunt their growth? Will they have enough energy for school and play? And how can you prepare satisfying family meals without meat, chicken, and seafood?

With concerns like these, you may want to discourage your child from changing their diet. But, “research shows that kids eating a plant-based diet have comparable growth and development to omnivorous kids. Plant-based kids also have lower rates of overweight/obesity and lower inflammatory markers,” says Sabine Gempel, DPT, PT, a board-certified cardiovascular and pulmonary specialist and physical therapist with the University of Miami Health System.

Nutrient-rich vegetarian and vegan diets are healthy choices for children and adults at all stages of life, including pregnant women and athletes, according to the American Dietetics Association.

You can find meat-based nutrients in plant-based food sources.

Red meat, poultry, and seafood do contain essential nutrients. But, they can also be provided by plant-based food sources, without the cholesterol and saturated fat found in animal products.

For example, animal foods contain protein, zinc, and iron — as do legumes, nuts,
seeds, grains, and starches. But fiber is found solely in plant foods. Dietary fiber (also called roughage) is essential for maintaining a healthy weight, helps stabilize blood sugar levels, and reduces cholesterol. Childhood obesity and diabetes are on the rise, and cardiovascular disease can begin in childhood. Fiber can also help children avoid constipation, feel full, and maintain a balanced gut microbiome.

“Among children eating the standard American diet, only 10% get enough fiber, 10% get enough produce, and 60% of the diet is processed or highly processed,” Dr. Gempel says. “This tells us children are not eating nearly enough unprocessed plant foods.”

“Children need nutrients, not specific foods,” says Dr. Gempel.

“The goal is to choose foods that provide those nutrients, while also promoting your child’s optimal immediate and long-term health.”

**Vitamin B12**

Vitamin B12 is an essential vitamin made in the digestive tracts of animals like cows and sheep. But, “B12 deficiency is fairly common, even among those eating an omnivorous diet,” Dr. Gempel says.

If your child follows a vegetarian diet (mostly plants), they can get B12 from dairy milk, cheese, and eggs. By avoiding animal products in addition to meat, poultry, and seafood, they are actually following a vegan diet (exclusively plants). Vegans need to take a vitamin B12 supplement or eat/drink plant-based foods fortified with B12. In addition, Dr. Gempel says, “a B12 supplement is likely a good idea, regardless of diet. Ask your pediatrician about having your child’s B12 levels assessed.”
Docosahexaenoic Acid (DHA)

DHA is an important omega-3 fatty acid necessary for brain and nervous system development, among other health benefits. Fish is the most common dietary source of DHA. It is also found in algae, such as seaweed, which can be enjoyed in veggie sushi rolls or dehydrated crispy snacks. DHA supplements (fish oil or algae oil) are another option for children who won’t eat fish or seaweed.

Iron

“Iron deficiency is one of the most common nutrient deficiencies among all kids, though an iron supplement probably isn’t necessary,” even for vegetarian children, she says.

Children should eat iron-rich plant foods paired with vitamin C-rich foods to enhance absorption. Vegetarians find their iron in tofu, legumes (beans, lentils, and peas), wholegrain cereals (some of which are fortified with iron), broccoli, Asian green veggies, nuts, dried apricots, eggs, and seeds (like sunflower and sesame).

“The dietary fat intake needs of a child are greater than that of an adult,” Dr. Gempel says.

Vegan sources of healthy fat (monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats) include:

- avocado
- olive oil
- nut butter (or whole nuts for children who are old enough)
- seeds and seed butter (including chia, flax, sesame, sunflower, and pumpkin)
- coconut and coconut oil
- vegan milk (made from oats, soybeans, nuts, flax seeds, or coconut)
Dairy products (like yogurt, cheese, and milk) and eggs can also provide a significant source of calories and fat but should be consumed in moderation due to their cholesterol and saturated fat contents.

**Cooking advice for meat-eating parents**

“There’s no doubt that having a diet-divided family can be a difficult situation,” Dr. Gempel acknowledges. “But, you can get the kids involved and think of this change as an adventure.”

- Include your kids in meal selection, prep/cooking, or even growing the fruits and veggies at home.
- Check out the many YouTube channels, Instagram accounts, websites, and cookbooks featuring various plant-based or plant-predominant recipes.
- Look for recipes with a shortlist of ingredients, limited prep and cooking time, and a variety of ethnic flavors to keep it easy and exciting.
- Try a new recipe each week.

“If you’re a little reluctant to make the switch or only have some family members eating plant-based, start with something familiar,” says Dr. Gempel.

- Prepare pasta with a red sauce, sautéed veggies, and plant-based sausage.
- Revamp taco night with grilled onions and peppers, avocado, salsa, lettuce, tomato, and the choice of sautéed plant-based seasoned “meat” crumbles or animal meat for family members who are not vegetarian.
- Try plant-based alternatives for meat and dairy products kids typically love (like veggie and bean burgers; soy-based chicken fingers or sausages; dairy-free milk, yogurt, cheese, and ice cream). Look for minimally processed food (with ingredients you recognize as real foods, not fillers) and low in sodium, saturated fat, and cholesterol.
Making everyone in the house eat vegetarian is not necessary.

“Even for those eating omnivorous diets, this is a huge opportunity to reduce your portions of animal products and make plant-based dishes dominate the plate,” Dr. Gempel says. “For those still eating meat and dairy, think of those products as smaller components of the meal and not the focus of the plate.”

Research shows that diets heavy in nutrient-rich plant foods, lower in meat and dairy, but still including seafood, are incredibly healthful for your body, brain, and mood. The Mediterranean diet, for instance, may be a promising approach for a family with both meat-eaters and vegetarians.

As Dr. Gempel says, “Most children and adults aren’t meeting the recommendation for fruits and veggies, whole grains, or legumes. So, every additional serving of plant foods in your diet is a step in the right direction.”

Dana Kantrowitz is a contributing writer for UMiami Health News.
What's best for your kid's ear infection?

As alarming as this condition can be, "up to 90% of children have at least one ear infection by the age of three," says Ramzi Younis, M.D., a pediatric ear, nose, and throat specialist with the University of Miami Health System. Read more.

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