

IS IT SAFE FOR MY CHILD TO BE A VEGETARIAN

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Many children go through a stage of declaring themselves vegetarians. This can be upsetting to parents, but actually it could be the start of life-long healthy eating habits. So let's look at the facts.



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All types of diets have benefits and risks associated with them. What is known for sure is that diets made up mainly of fruits, vegetables, nuts, seeds and beans reduce the risks of heart disease and many cancers. The other certainty is as the percentage of animal products increases in a diet so does the increase in heart disease and cancer.

The real key to being a healthy vegetarian is to eat a lot of vegetables of all kinds. The unhealthy vegetarian will simply avoid meat and continue to eat highly processed food-like substances and vegetarian fast food. They may not be eating animal products but this type of vegetarianism will not improve their health and can be dangerous. The true benefit of being a healthy vegetarian comes from the consumption of high-nutrient and low-caloric fruits, vegetables, nuts, seeds and beans. This is what fuels the body to run efficiently.

The Academy of Pediatrics recommends that children consume 30 percent of their daily calories from fats, with 50 to 55 percent of calories coming from carbohydrates and the remaining 10 to 15 percent from protein. This can be confusing for some parents and it becomes more worrisome for parents of vegetarians. Parents rightly worry about nutrient deficiencies but these can be easily remedied with the right food choices. For instance, eating high amounts of plant foods will decrease concerns over deficiencies in calcium, iron, zinc and protein. Fortified soymilk will provide the necessary Vitamins D and B12. Adding avocados to a salad will supplement the healthy fats a child's brain needs for development. To improve the health of your family you have to plan your meals so they provide the best nutrition.

Sit down with your family and discuss the value of menu planning so that everyone gets what they need. Designate Monday as a "Meatless Monday Menu" making enough food so that on Tuesday your vegetarian child can eat the leftovers. Be willing to make compromises and then develop some house rules—for example:

- The only easily available after-school snack is in the fruit bowl on the kitchen counter.
- There is only seconds on vegetables. In fact make note that the most needed vegetables are the green ones. You have to eat your greens!
- Avocados are necessary in your child's salad so they receive the essential fats needed for brain growth.
- Eat a salad for lunch and dinner. In fact it can even BE your entire meal. On the salad increase the nutrients by adding these greens--artichokes, asparagus, Bok choy, broccoli, brussel sprouts, cabbage, collards, kale, snow peas, string beans, swiss chard and zucchini. All of these greens will help your body get the nutrients needed to function at peak performance. But don't stop there. Add other colors to the salad too. If you want to be really healthy use flavored vinegars to top your salads or get dressings on the side so that you are not adding large amounts of high calorie and unhealthy fats to your meal.
- Sample the fortified soymilks available to find the best fit for your family. Go in with the mindset that it is soymilk and NOT milk. It will taste good once you find the right one for your family but it will not taste like dairy milk.

Support and enhance your child's health early in life and it will become a habit for the entire family.