

[Your Teenage Vegetarian](#)

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MEDICINE

Your Teenage Vegetarian

Nutritionist advises how to keep'em healthy

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Teenagers who become vegetarians can be developing dietary habits that help provide them with a lifetime of good health. A plant-based diet is known to decrease the incidence of certain illnesses, including heart disease and colon and breast cancers. Obtaining accurate information is the first step toward becoming a vegetarian. Essential sources of guidance include vegetarian cookbooks, magazines and a vegetarian food pyramid.

Teenagers should discuss their decision with their parents and perhaps with their physicians. Such a discussion will help allay concerns about maintaining a nutrient-rich, balanced diet and give parents time to learn how to prepare balanced vegetarian meals.

There are several forms of vegetarianism. Some vegetarians add fish and dairy products to a diet of grains, beans, fruits, vegetables, nuts and seeds. Lacto-ovovegetarians incorporate

dairy products and eggs. Lacto-vegetarians add only dairy products while ovo-vegetarians add only eggs. Vegans abstain from all animal products in favor of an entirely plant-based diet.

Growing youngsters need more vitamins, minerals, calcium, calories and iron than do adults. Teenagers can meet their requirement of 2,200 to 2,400 calories through carbohydrates such as brown rice, potatoes, couscous, bread and cereal. Plant-based foods generally contain a form of iron that is absorbed in smaller quantities than is iron found in meats and poultry. Young people can boost intake by selecting iron-fortified cereals and breads on a daily basis. A diet rich in fruits and vegetables that are high in ascorbic acid can also increase the body's iron uptake.

Those who elect to become vegans might have to add B12 to their diets through fortified soy milk or vitamin supplements. Vitamin B12 is important to the development of the myelin sheath that covers nerve fibers.

Calcium is another important requirement. Calcium-fortified soy or rice milk can be a good alternative for those who do not eat dairy products. Eight ounces of fortified soy milk contains between 200 and 400 milligrams of calcium; cow's milk has about 300 milligrams. Youngsters might still need to seek out other sources of calcium--for example, fortified tofu, almonds, black strap molasses, broccoli and other vegetables.

Teens might want to go grocery shopping with adults and offer

their input on food

selection. If your teens have elected to become vegetarians, support their choices. You could be supporting a change that promotes a lifetime of good health.

Janice James, M.S., R.D., is Senior Nutritionist at the Education Center at New York University Medical Center's Cooperative Care Center. She is a member of the Seventh Day Adventists, a Christian sect which strictly adheres to a vegetarian diet.