



Harvard Women's Health Watch

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Is a vegetarian or vegan diet for you?

Before you discard all animal-based foods, learn how to approach this style of eating in a healthy way.

Although most older Americans still enjoy their steaks and chicken, an estimated 2.5 million of those ages 55 and older have abandoned red meat and poultry in favor of a predominantly plant-based diet. Some people decide to go vegetarian or vegan because they can't bear the thought of harming any living creature. Others do it for the health perks, of which there seem to be many.

"There's certainly some research on the benefits of the vegetarian diet," says Kathy McManus, director of the Department of Nutrition at Harvard-affiliated Brigham and Women's Hospital. She ticks off the various advantages associated with this way of eating—lower body mass index and blood pressure; reduced risks for heart disease, diabetes, and cancer; and longer life.

If you're thinking about going vegetarian or vegan but are worried about making a big change in how you eat, know that there are many different layers to this way of eating. "There are options within a vegetarian diet if a woman wants to get her feet wet," McManus says. The most common approaches are these:

- ▶ **Semi-vegetarian.** You still eat animal products, but more selectively. Many semi-vegetarians eat chicken and fish but not red meat.
- ▶ **Pescatarian.** You avoid meat and poultry but still eat fish and seafood.

▶ **Lacto-ovo vegetarian.** You skip all meat, fish, and poultry but include dairy and eggs in your diet.

▶ **Vegan.** This solely plant-based diet is the strictest form of vegetarianism. You eat no animal products at all—not even eggs or dairy products.



Vegetarian & Vegan Diet Pyramid

The foundations of the vegetarian and vegan diets are vegetables and fruits. Also include smaller amounts of whole grains, beans, nuts, and plant oils.

Watch your nutrition

Vegetarian and vegan diets can be healthy, but they can lack certain nutrients. You may have to use a little creativity to ensure you get enough protein, calcium, iron, and vitamin B₁₂.

You can find many of these nutrients in eggs and dairy if you're vegetarian, and from plant sources if you're vegan (see "Vegetarian and vegan diets: Where to find the nutrients you need" on pg. 7). But you may need an added boost. "Because vitamin B₁₂ is found only in animal sources, if you're a vegan you might consider taking a supplement," McManus says. Omega-3 fatty acids are found in both fish and flaxseeds, but your body doesn't absorb the plant-based form as readily as the omega-3s from seafood. Plant-based supplements are available if your diet needs more of these heart-healthy fats.

Keep in mind that going vegetarian doesn't give you carte blanche to eat whatever you want—especially if you're trying to control

continued on p. 7 ▶▶

INSIDE

Ask the Doctor 2

- ▶ What can I do about repeated bladder infections?
- ▶ How can I treat mild depression?

New blood pressure guidelines 3

What they could mean for you.

Preparing for the future . . . 4

How to communicate your wishes to get the treatment you want.

Before you consider a joint replacement 6

How to make the decision and get the best outcome from surgery.

What's hiding in your medicines? 7

Ingredients you might not expect could be risky to your health.

Research we're watching . . 8

- ▶ Advice to help women lower their stroke risk.
- ▶ High blood pressure drugs linked to falls.
- ▶ Daily aspirin may lower ovarian cancer risk.

FIVE THINGS TO DO THIS MONTH

1 Swap packaged foods for fresh. You'll avoid salt and help lower your blood pressure. (page 3)

2 Appoint a health care proxy. Line up someone you trust to make important health decisions for you in the future. (page 4)

3 Do muscle-strengthening exercises. They're an effective way to protect your joints. (page 6)

4 Check your medicine ingredients. Look for additives like sugar and salt. (page 7)

5 Consider a daily baby aspirin. It could protect against stroke and ovarian cancer. (page 8)

What's hiding in your medicines?

Salt, sugar, and other unexpected ingredients could be lurking where you least expect them.

Thanks to public health campaigns, most of us are well aware that added salt and sugar in our food are not good for our health. But what about the sugar and salt that's in our medicine cabinets? Some of the drugs we take can be hidden sources of these and other additives.

A British study published in December 2013 found that people who took effervescent versions of medicines—such as the pain relievers acetaminophen and aspirin—faced a higher risk for heart attacks, strokes, and other cardiovascular events than people who didn't take these drugs. The culprit behind the participants' heart troubles? High sodium levels in the medication.

Along with the main active ingredient

in medications, there can be many more inactive components, which are sometimes referred to as excipients. Drug manufacturers add preservatives, dyes, flavorings, sweeteners, bulking agents, and other inactive ingredients to give medicines a more pleasant taste, look, or texture; protect them from bacterial invasion; and prolong their shelf life.

The FDA has approved more than 700 different additives for use in prescription and over-the-counter drugs. Although these ingredients are required to be safe for human consumption, they may not be safe for everyone. Excess sodium can cause heart problems in those at risk for heart disease. Sugar can spell trouble for people with diabetes. Dyes

can lead to allergic reactions. Starches can trigger a reaction in people with celiac disease or gluten sensitivity. Tablets that use the milk sugar, lactose, as a binder can be trouble for people with lactose intolerance.

Take precautions

So what can you do to avoid having an unexpected drug reaction? Whenever you get a new prescription, read through the patient information materials to check for any possible allergy alerts. Ask your doctor and pharmacist about both the active and inactive ingredients, especially if you have a known allergy.

At least once a year, it's helpful to sit down with your doctor or pharmacist and go over the list of all the medicines you take—both prescription and over-the-counter—to make sure none of the drugs on your list could potentially interact or cause unintended side effects. ♥

Vegetarian diet (continued from pg. 1)

your weight. Go heavy on fruits, vegetables, and whole grains but limit foods high in saturated fat, such as ice cream, whole milk, and cheese. And watch how much you eat at each meal. "People who are trying to lose weight can certainly do it on a vegetarian diet, but they have to limit portions," McManus says.

Eating out

When you eat out in restaurants, ask the chef to substitute beans for the meat in an entrée. You can also stick with the salad bar or order a few vegetable-based appetizers and sides instead of an entrée. McManus, who is vegetarian, uses this technique herself. She also

visits ethnic restaurants. Indian, Thai, and Chinese cuisines all feature an abundance of vegetarian options.

Going green

The transition to a greener diet doesn't have to be difficult. McManus recommends starting by increasing the number of vegetables on your plate at each meal. "Fill half the plate with vegetables—cooked, raw, or in a salad," she suggests. Then incorporate an all-vegetarian meal once or twice a week. If you like it, keep adding vegetarian—or vegan—meals until you're fully immersed in the diet. To keep your food choices diverse without fish, poultry, and red meat, play around with different vegetables and grains, and spice up your meals with seasonings. "I think sometimes people say, 'Vegetables are so boring,'" McManus says. "Well, they don't need to be. There are so many cuisines with great spices to choose from." ♥

Vegetarian and vegan diets: Where to find the nutrients you need	
Nutrient	Examples of plant-based food sources
 Ca Calcium	Vegetarians: Low-fat or fat-free milk, yogurt, cheese Vegetarians and vegans: Fortified soy milk or rice milk, fortified orange juice, tofu with added calcium, broccoli, beans, leafy green vegetables, almonds, almond butter, sesame seeds, soybeans
 Fe Iron	Vegetarians: Eggs, enriched breads and pasta Vegetarians and vegans: Soy nuts, tofu, kale, spinach, beans, peanut butter
 PROTEIN Protein	Vegetarians: Eggs, milk and other dairy products Vegetarians and vegans: Lentils, beans, quinoa, oatmeal, nuts
 B₁₂ Vitamin B ₁₂	Vegetarians: Eggs, milk and other dairy products Vegetarians and vegans: Fortified soy milk or orange juice, fortified cereals

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