

My Teen Has Decided to Become A Vegetarian. How Will She Get Her Protein?

Plant-based proteins can be enough if consumed adequately.



If you are a parent who is worried about your vegetarian child getting enough protein or somebody who wants to become a vegetarian, then worry no more! Here's what you need to know: it is possible to get the protein that your body needs through only plant-based sources. Additionally, being a vegetarian does not restrict a person from consuming eggs and (some) dairy—this means that they can still get animal-based protein without consuming meat.

A Plant-Based Diet is Healthier

In reality, maintaining a diet that contains more plant-based foods is excellent for your health. According to the [EAT-Lancet Commission Report](#) [1], the ideal diet for people is one that has a variety of plant-based foods, has more unsaturated fats as compared to saturated fats, is low in animal proteins, and limits the quantities of highly processed foods, refined grains, and added sugars. Such an eating pattern can lead to benefits, including:

- longer life expectancy
- reduced risk of type 2 diabetes and heart disease
- healthier body weight
- slimmer waistline
- reduced inflammation and oxidative stress – that can lead to chronic diseases or accelerated aging by promoting cell damage
- higher levels of important nutrients, including potassium, magnesium, folate, iron, and fiber
- A sharper mind with fewer memory problems in the long term
- A higher quality of life due to a healthier mind and body

Can You Get Enough Protein Without Eating Meat?

Absolutely. It is possible to meet your protein needs (as well as other nutrient needs) without consuming meat. You may have learned from childhood that our bodies require meat. The truth is that we need some key nutrients found in meat, but they can be obtained in sufficient quantities from plant-based sources too.

Every protein is made up of building molecules called amino acids, regardless of whether it originates from a plant or animal source. Animal proteins are considered complete proteins since they contain all the essential nine amino acids that are required by our bodies to support protein tissues. The majority of plant proteins lack one or more of these nine essential amino acids.

Perhaps this is why up until a few years back, many people believed that they had to eat complementary proteins with plant-based proteins to utilize them in their bodies efficiently. For instance, beans and rice are complimentary because the key amino acids missing in rice are present in beans, and vice versa. However, now we know that there's no need to worry about combining plant proteins. You can get an adequate supply of essential amino acids if you eat a wide variety of plant foods and get enough total calories, within a 24-hour period. Your liver helps you in this case by storing several essential amino acids throughout the day for later use. [3]

The best course of action, therefore, is that you consume a diverse, nutritious diet (and avoid any junk food, including vegan junk food). Make sure that you mix things up a little so that you get a broad spectrum of amino acids along with minerals, vitamins, antioxidants in your snacks and meals. And, this can easily be done by including fruits, vegetables, pulses (peas, chickpeas, lentils, and beans), whole grains, seeds, and nuts in your daily diet. Variety is the spice of life, they say. Well, it is the secret behind good health, too!

References

[1] Willett W, Rockström J, Loken B, et al. Food in the Anthropocene: the EAT-Lancet Commission on healthy diets from sustainable food systems [published correction appears in Lancet. 2019 Feb 9;393(10171):530] [published correction appears in Lancet. 2019 Jun

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[2] Melina V, Craig W, Levin S. Position of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics: vegetarian diets. *J Acad Nutr Diet*. 2016;116(12):1970-80. doi:10.1016/j.jand.2016.09.025. Available from: [http://www.andjrn.org/article/S2212-2672\(16\)31192-3/fulltext](http://www.andjrn.org/article/S2212-2672(16)31192-3/fulltext)

[3] Hoek, A. C., Luning, P. A., Weijzen, P., Engels, W., Kok, F. J., & De Graaf, C. (2011). Replacement of meat by meat substitutes. A survey on person-and product-related factors in consumer acceptance. *Appetite*, 56(3), 662-673.