

Aging Healthfully Newsletter

Illinois Department on Aging

National Vegetarian Awareness Month

October is National Vegetarian Awareness Month! Whether you realize it or not, you have most likely eaten a vegetarian meal at least once in your lifetime. Cheese pizza, a grilled cheese sandwich, cheese tortellini with marinara, or a dinner salad with cheese are all examples of vegetarian meals.

The consumption of more veggie-based meals and dishes are on the rise. Some individuals are choosing to eat more vegetarian meals due to the associated health benefits such as reduced risk for certain types of cancers and improved digestive health, while others do so for ethical, religious, or ecological reasons.

If you are looking to incorporate more vegetarian meals in your diet, start small by swapping out one meal per week or per day with a meatless or vegetarian meal – Go “Meatless” on Mondays or meatless for lunch!

Even if you do not consider yourself a vegetarian, here are some additional reasons to celebrate Vegetarian Awareness Month:

- 1. You can save money by eating meatless dishes** – Meat accounts for approximately 10% of Americans food costs. While this may not seem like much, if you were to swap out 250 pounds of meat, fish, and poultry that each non-vegetarian consumes per year, for fruits, grains, and vegetables, this would be an individual cost savings of \$4,000 per year on average!
- 2. More fiber means improved digestive and heart health** – Vegetarian diets are significantly higher in fiber compared to non-vegetarian diets or omnivorous diets (both plant and animal foods). As an example, 1 pound of beef contains zero fiber, while 1 cup of lentils contains 16 grams of fiber.
- 3. For your overall health** – studies have shown that vegetarian diets contain significantly higher amounts of vitamins A, riboflavin (vitamin B2), vitamin C, vitamin E, beta carotene (an antioxidant), calcium, and folate compared to non-vegetarian diets.



4. **Expand your taste palate** – Vegetarian meals can be quite delicious, fast, and easy to make. Experimenting with ingredients like spices, sauces, herbs, and meatless options can be fun and surprisingly tasty.
5. **Respect for our environment and sustainability** – raising enough animals to meet the demands of the U.S. population for consumption puts a strain on our environment (e.g. the water, soil, and air quality are all affected) in comparison to growing and consuming plants. Consuming vegetarian meals more often in the place of animal proteins can help!
6. **You can meet all of your recommended nutrients through a vegetarian diet** – Choosing high quality sources of protein from vegetarian sources such as soy-based foods (e.g. tofu, tempeh, edamame), beans, lentils, quinoa, nuts and nut butters, and a variety of fruits, vegetables, and whole grains can help you meet your daily recommended nutrient needs.

It is important to consume a variety of foods in the proper amounts in order to meet your calorie and nutritional requirements. For example, vegetarians may need to focus on foods that are a good source of protein, calcium, iron, vitamin B12, and zinc to prevent deficiencies.

Nutrients to Focus on for a Vegetarian Diet:



Protein: is essential for growth, repair, and maintenance of cells in the body. In addition, protein assists in metabolism, immunity, fluid balance, and nutrient transport. Protein needs can be met by eating a variety of plant-based foods and it is not necessary to combine different protein sources in the same meal to obtain all essential amino acids (the building blocks of protein).

- **Sources** – lentils, beans, nuts, nut butters, peas, soy-based products (tofu, tempeh, soy/black bean burgers), peas, eggs and dairy products for those that are lacto-ovo vegetarians.

Calcium: Is essential for building and maintaining strong bones and teeth. Strict vegetarians or vegans may not be able to meet their daily calcium requirements through plant-based foods alone and may need a calcium supplement. Always consult with a doctor to see if a supplement is beneficial and safe for you to consume.

- **Sources** – calcium-fortified breakfast cereals, orange juice, and milk-alternatives (soy beverage, almond beverage, etc.), tofu made with calcium sulfate, collard greens, mustard greens, and bok choy.

Iron: Assists with carrying oxygen in the blood to the cells and is involved with making amino acids and hormones.

- **Sources** – Whole grain products, iron-fortified breakfast cereals, spinach, dried fruits (e.g. prunes, raisins, apricots), beans, nuts, seeds, lentils, and peas.

Vitamin B12: Assists with the creation of DNA and the formation of blood. It is also required for healthy nervous system function. Vitamin B12 is found primarily in animal products and some fortified foods. Strict vegetarians or vegans may not be able to meet their daily vitamin B12 requirements through plant-based foods alone and may need a B12 supplement. Always consult with a doctor to see if a supplement is beneficial and safe for you to consume.

- **Sources** – milk products, eggs, B12-fortified breakfast cereals, soy beverage, veggie burgers, and nutritional yeast.

Zinc: Assists with biochemical reactions in the body, immune function, and growth.

- **Sources** – beans, zinc-fortified breakfast cereals, wheat germ, pumpkin seeds, and milk products for lacto-vegetarians.

How Well Do You Know Your Food Groups?

Fruits: Older adults should eat at least 1 ½ to 2 cup equivalents of fruit each day.

½ cup equivalent examples:

- ¼ cup dried fruit
- 1 small piece of fruit, such as a 2-inch peach or plum
- ½ cup 100% orange juice
- ½ cup grapes
- ½ of a medium grapefruit



Vegetables: Eat at least 2 to 2 ½ cup equivalents of fruit each day.

½ cup equivalent examples:

- 1 cup uncooked spinach
- 6 baby carrots
- ½ cup cooked green beans
- ½ of a large red bell pepper
- ½ cup broccoli florets



Grains: Eat 6oz equivalent of grains, bread, or bread alternative each day with at least half of the servings coming from whole grain sources (at least 3oz).

1 ounce (oz) equivalent examples:

- ½ cup cooked cereal, rice, or pasta
- 3 cups popped popcorn
- 1 small 6-inch corn or flour tortilla
- 1 slice of bread (whole grain or enriched)
- 1 cup breakfast cereal (flakes, rounds, or puffed)



Proteins: Eat around 6oz of lean meat or meat alternatives each day.

1 ounce (oz) equivalent examples:

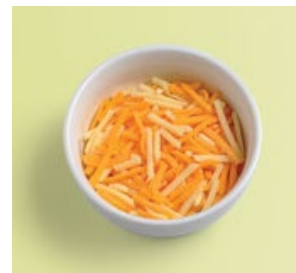
- 1 egg
- ¼ cup tofu
- 2 tablespoons hummus
- 1 tablespoon peanut butter
- ½ cup of split pea, lentil, or bean soup



Dairy: Consume 3 cup equivalents of milk or milk alternatives each day.

1 cup equivalent examples:

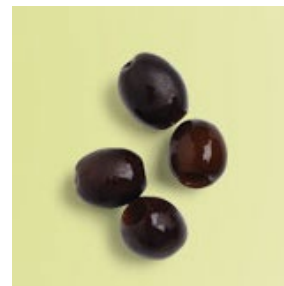
- 1/3 cup shredded cheese
- 1 cup yogurt
- 2 cups cottage cheese
- 1 cup calcium-fortified soy, almond, or rice beverage
- 1 ½ ounces (oz) hard cheese (e.g. cheddar, swiss)



Oils: Consume around 5 to 6 teaspoons of oils each day.

Teaspoons of oil examples:

- 4 large ripe olives contain ½ teaspoon oil
- 1 tablespoon peanut butter has 2 teaspoons oil
- ½ of a medium avocado has 3 teaspoons of oil



Attachments:

- 10 Tips Healthy Eating for Vegetarians
- 10 Tips Vary Your Protein Routine
- Portion Distortion Quiz (NIH)
- **Recipes:** Autumn Apple and Pumpkin Oatmeal; Pumpkin Pie Smoothie



References:

- <https://foodandnutrition.org/blogs/stone-soup/celebrate-vegetarian-awareness-month/>
- <https://www.choosemyplate.gov/node/5635>
- https://www.nia.nih.gov/health/know-your-food-groups?utm_source=nia-mailchimp&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=healthyaging-20200706&utm_source=NIA+Main&utm_campaign=90e6cd5b00-healthyaging-foodgroups-20200706&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_ffe42fdac3-90e6cd5b00-18449047

Illinois Department on Aging
One Natural Resources Way, Suite 100
Springfield, IL 62702

<https://www2.illinois.gov/aging/programs/nutrition/Pages/nutrition.aspx>