

Vegetarian Diet

A full guide to vegetarian eating, nutrition, practical choices and individual needs

A vegetarian diet can be nutritionally balanced, but simply removing meat and fish does not automatically create a balanced diet. What replaces those foods matters. This guide looks at vegetarian eating without turning it into another rigid set of rules.

What does vegetarian mean?

Lacto-ovo vegetarian: avoids meat and fish but includes dairy and eggs. **Lacto-vegetarian:** includes dairy but not eggs. **Ovo-vegetarian:** includes eggs but not dairy. People sometimes use 'vegetarian' differently, so the foods actually eaten matter more than the label.

The basic building blocks

Food area	Examples and role
Protein foods	Beans, lentils, chickpeas, peas, tofu, tempeh, mycoprotein, eggs, dairy, nuts and seeds.
Starchy foods	Potatoes, bread, rice, pasta, oats and other grains; higher-fibre choices where suitable.
Vegetables & fruit	Fresh, frozen, tinned or dried choices provide fibre and micronutrients.
Dairy/alternatives	Milk, yoghurt and cheese, or suitably fortified alternatives, can contribute calcium and protein.
Fats	Unsaturated oils, nuts and seeds can provide essential fats.
Fortified foods	Can be particularly useful for vitamin B12, calcium and vitamin D depending on what is excluded.

Balance does not have to happen at every meal

Current NHS guidance says balance can be considered over a day or even a week. That can be more realistic than expecting every plate to contain every nutrient. Variety is useful, but individual tolerance, appetite, culture, cost and access all affect what is practical.

Why people choose vegetarian eating

Reasons include ethical beliefs, environmental concerns, religion, culture, dislike of meat, cost, health goals, sensory preferences or simply enjoying vegetarian food. There is no need for everyone following a vegetarian diet to have the same reason.

Protein, Iron & Vitamin B12

Protein

Most vegetarians can obtain enough protein from a varied diet. Beans, lentils and chickpeas provide protein plus fibre; tofu, tempeh and mycoprotein can be useful meat substitutes; eggs and dairy contribute protein when included; and nuts and seeds add protein alongside fats and minerals. Eating a variety of protein sources helps provide the amino acids used for growth and repair.

Iron

Iron deserves particular attention because plant iron is less readily absorbed than iron from meat. NHS-listed vegetarian sources include pulses, dark green vegetables, wholemeal bread and flour, fortified cereals, nuts and dried fruit. Having vitamin C with an iron-containing meal can improve absorption.

Signs that iron may need checking

Tiredness has many possible causes and should not be self-diagnosed as iron deficiency. Persistent fatigue, weakness, breathlessness, palpitations, headaches, pale skin or other concerning symptoms warrant medical advice. A blood test can help determine whether iron deficiency or anaemia is present.

Vitamin B12

Vitamin B12 is naturally found in animal-derived foods. Vegetarians who regularly eat eggs and dairy may obtain B12 from these, but someone eating little or no egg/dairy needs a reliable source. NHS examples include fortified breakfast cereals, fortified dairy alternatives and fortified yeast extracts. People with very restricted intake may need individual advice about supplementation.

Do not guess with supplements

More is not always better. Supplements can be useful when indicated, but dose and need depend on diet, life stage and health. If deficiency is suspected, seek professional advice rather than relying on symptoms or social-media recommendations.

A practical protein check

Meal	Ways to add a protein source
Breakfast	Eggs; yoghurt; milk/fortified alternative; nuts/seeds; protein-containing cereal.
Lunch	Beans; lentils; hummus; egg; cheese; tofu; mycoprotein.
Dinner	Lentils; chickpeas; beans; tofu/tempeh; eggs; dairy; suitable meat alternative.
Snack if needed	Yoghurt; nuts/seeds; hummus; cheese; fortified drink, depending on needs.

Key point: A vegetarian meal does not need to imitate meat, but it does need enough nourishment. Removing the meat and leaving only vegetables can make a meal much less substantial.

Calcium, Vitamin D, Omega-3 & Other Nutrients

Calcium

Dairy foods such as milk, yoghurt and cheese provide calcium and protein. If dairy is excluded or only eaten in small amounts, look for suitable fortified alternatives. NHS guidance notes that fortified plant drinks can contribute calcium; calcium-set tofu and some green vegetables can also help.

Vitamin D

Vitamin D is difficult to obtain from food alone. UK guidance recommends considering a daily vitamin D supplement during autumn and winter. Some people may be advised to supplement throughout the year depending on risk factors. Fortified foods can also contribute.

Omega-3 fats

Vegetarian sources include flaxseed/linseed and its oil, rapeseed oil, walnuts, chia and other seeds, and omega-3-enriched eggs where used. NHS guidance notes that plant omega-3 does not necessarily have the same heart-health evidence as the long-chain omega-3 fats found in oily fish.

Iodine

Iodine intake can vary considerably in vegetarian diets. In the UK, dairy foods are an important source for many people, while some fortified alternatives may contain iodine and others may not. Seaweed is not a simple substitute because iodine levels can be very high and variable. Check labels and seek dietetic advice if dairy and fish are excluded and iodine intake is uncertain.

Zinc and selenium

Wholegrains, pulses, nuts, seeds, eggs and dairy can contribute zinc and selenium in different amounts. Very limited diets, multiple exclusions or low overall intake increase the chance that a nutrient gap becomes important.

Meat alternatives: useful but variable

Tofu, tempeh, mycoprotein, textured vegetable protein and manufactured vegetarian products can make meals convenient. Nutritional content varies widely. Some are high in protein or fortified; others may contain more salt or saturated fat. They can be part of a balanced diet without needing to be either praised as 'clean' or dismissed as 'processed'.

Dairy alternatives are not nutritionally identical

Plant drinks and yoghurts differ in protein and fortification. NHS guidance recommends choosing unsweetened alternatives fortified with vitamins and minerals such as calcium and vitamin D. Soya products often contain more protein than many other plant drinks, but the best option also depends on allergy, tolerance and preference.

Meals, Shopping, Budget & Everyday Life

A realistic vegetarian day - examples, not a meal plan

Breakfast: porridge made with milk or fortified alternative, with tolerated fruit or seeds; eggs on toast; yoghurt with oats; or fortified cereal. **Lunch:** lentil soup and bread; baked potato with beans and cheese; hummus wrap; egg sandwich; or leftovers. **Evening:** bean chilli and rice; lentil bolognese; tofu stir-fry; chickpea curry; omelette with potatoes; or a familiar family meal with a vegetarian protein. **Snacks if needed:** yoghurt, nuts, hummus, cheese and crackers, fruit, or another familiar nourishing food.

Budget-friendly vegetarian eating

Pulses are often economical: dried versions can be very inexpensive, while tinned beans and lentils save time. Frozen vegetables reduce waste. Eggs can be a relatively low-cost protein where included. Oats, potatoes, rice, pasta and bread are useful staples. Branded meat substitutes can be convenient but are not essential.

Simple cupboard framework

Cupboard	Fridge/freezer	Useful extras
Beans, lentils, chickpeas	Eggs/dairy if included	Rapeseed or olive oil
Rice, pasta, oats	Tofu/tempeh/mycoprotein	Nuts/seeds if safe
Tinned tomatoes/vegetables	Frozen vegetables	Herbs and spices
Fortified cereals	Fortified dairy alternatives	Hummus or spreads

Eating out

Vegetarian options are common, but 'vegetarian' does not guarantee a balanced meal. If an option is mainly vegetables or salad, consider whether it also contains a protein source and enough carbohydrate/energy for your needs. People with allergies should still check ingredients and cross-contamination information.

Convenience matters

Ready meals, microwave grains, frozen vegetables, tinned pulses, prepared sauces and meat alternatives can be particularly useful when time, disability, fatigue or executive functioning makes cooking difficult. Nutrition advice that only works on a high-energy day is not practical advice.

Transitioning gradually

Someone moving from a meat-containing diet does not need to change every meal at once. Try one familiar vegetarian meal, replace meat in one recipe with a suitable protein, or increase vegetarian meals gradually. This also gives time to learn which foods are satisfying and tolerated.

ARFID, Sensory Needs, Eating Disorders & Medical Considerations

ARFID, autism and sensory differences

Vegetarian eating can be straightforward for some neurodivergent people and very difficult for others. Pulses, tofu, mixed dishes and meat alternatives can have textures, smells or appearances that are hard to tolerate. If a person already has a small safe-food range, removing meat or another established safe food without an acceptable replacement can reduce nutritional intake.

Start from what is safe. A tolerated egg, yoghurt, cheese, fortified cereal or familiar vegetarian product may be more useful than pressuring someone to eat lentils because they are perceived as healthier. New foods can be offered separately and predictably, and progress can be gradual.

Eating disorders and restrictive eating

Vegetarianism can be a genuine ethical or personal choice. It can also sometimes become a socially acceptable way to remove more foods during an eating disorder. Consider the wider pattern: are exclusions increasing, is eating becoming more fearful, are meals being skipped, are social situations avoided, or is the person distressed when vegetarian 'rules' cannot be followed?

Allergies and intolerances

Vegetarian diets often rely on dairy, eggs, soya, wheat, nuts, seeds or pulses, but these foods are not safe or suitable for everyone. Multiple exclusions can make protein, energy and micronutrient adequacy harder. A registered dietitian is especially useful where allergy, intolerance and vegetarian restriction overlap.

Pregnancy, breastfeeding, babies and children

NHS guidance states that vegetarian diets during pregnancy and breastfeeding need adequate vitamins and minerals, and vegetarian children need a wide variety of foods to provide the energy and nutrients required for growth. These are stages where professional advice can be particularly valuable if intake is limited.

Older adults and low appetite

Protein and energy can become harder to obtain when appetite is small. Large salads or high-fibre meals may fill someone before they have eaten enough. Smaller nutrient-dense meals, regular protein sources and individual dietetic advice may be more appropriate.

When to seek professional support

Speak with a GP or registered dietitian if there is unexplained weight loss, persistent fatigue, suspected anaemia or deficiency, gastrointestinal symptoms, multiple food exclusions, pregnancy with restricted intake, a medical condition affecting nutrition, or concern about a child's growth or diet.

The label 'vegetarian' should never be more important than the person's nutritional safety. A vegetarian diet can be adapted, flexible and nourishing; it does not need to be perfect.

Myths, Personal Check-In & Sources

Common myths

“Vegetarians always lack protein.” A varied vegetarian diet can provide adequate protein. **“You must eat tofu.”** Tofu is one option among many. **“Vegetarian automatically means healthy.”** Overall balance still matters. **“You need to combine specific proteins at every meal.”** Eating a variety of protein foods across the day is generally more important than complicated food-combining rules. **“Meat substitutes are always unhealthy.”** Products vary; labels and the overall diet provide more useful information than the word 'processed'.

Your nutrition check-in

- Why am I vegetarian, or why am I considering it?
- Which protein foods do I actually enjoy and tolerate?
- Where am I getting iron and vitamin B12?
- If I avoid dairy, are my alternatives appropriately fortified?
- Do my meals contain enough energy as well as vegetables?
- Have I removed foods without finding nutritionally useful replacements?
- Is this diet making food more manageable - or increasingly restrictive?
- Would a dietitian help me adapt the diet around allergies, sensory needs or health conditions?

A message from Space to Breathe Therapy

Food choices can be connected to ethics, culture, health, sensory needs, finances, identity and personal values. There is no need to prove that you are a 'good' vegetarian by eating foods you cannot tolerate or by following the diet perfectly. What matters is finding a way of nourishing yourself that is safe, realistic and sustainable. If eating is becoming smaller, harder or more stressful, support can help you find a way forward without judgement.

Evidence and further reading

NHS - The vegetarian diet (reviewed 10 March 2026): current UK guidance on balanced vegetarian eating, protein sources, iron, vitamin B12 and vegetarian omega-3 sources. It notes that plant iron is less readily absorbed and that vegetarians need to ensure adequate iron and B12.

NHS - Eating a balanced diet: guidance on food groups, higher-fibre starchy foods, dairy or fortified alternatives, protein foods and unsaturated fats, with advice for people with special dietary or medical needs to seek individual professional guidance.

NHS - Dairy and alternatives: explains the contribution of dairy to protein and calcium and the role of unsweetened, calcium-fortified plant alternatives when dairy is avoided.

NHS - The vegan diet (reviewed 5 June 2026): useful additional guidance when a vegetarian diet excludes eggs and dairy, including calcium, vitamin D, B12, iodine and selenium considerations.

Educational information only. This resource is not a diagnosis, personalised meal plan or substitute for advice from a GP, registered dietitian or other qualified healthcare professional.