

Vegan Diet

A full guide to balanced vegan eating, key nutrients, practical choices and individual needs

A vegan diet excludes animal-derived foods such as meat, fish, dairy and eggs. It can be nutritionally adequate when it is thoughtfully planned, includes reliable fortified foods and uses supplements where needed. Vegan does not automatically mean balanced: what matters is the overall pattern and whether it meets the individual's needs.

What vegan eating can include

Vegetables, fruit, potatoes, bread, rice, pasta, oats and other grains; beans, lentils and chickpeas; tofu, tempeh and other soya foods; nuts and seeds; plant oils; fortified plant drinks and yoghurts; and vegan convenience foods. People may choose veganism for animal welfare, environmental, religious, cultural, health or personal reasons.

A useful food framework

Area	Examples and purpose
Starchy foods	Bread, rice, pasta, oats, potatoes and grains provide energy; higher-fibre choices can be useful where tolerated.
Protein	Beans, lentils, chickpeas, tofu, tempeh, soya, peas, nuts, seeds, seitan and suitable alternatives.
Fruit & vegetables	A variety of fresh, frozen, tinned or dried choices provides fibre and micronutrients.
Fortified alternatives	Plant drinks/yoghurts can contribute calcium, vitamin D, B12 and sometimes iodine; labels matter.
Fats	Rapeseed/olive oil, nuts, seeds and avocado provide energy and unsaturated fats.
Key nutrients	Vitamin B12 is essential to plan for; iodine, vitamin D, calcium, iron, selenium and omega-3 also deserve attention.

Whole foods and convenience foods can coexist

A nourishing vegan diet does not need to be made entirely from scratch. Tinned pulses, frozen vegetables, microwave grains, fortified cereals, ready meals and vegan alternatives can reduce workload. Conversely, an extremely bulky high-fibre diet can be difficult for people with small appetites, digestive symptoms or high energy needs.

No need for perfection

Balance can be considered across the day and week. Culture, budget, disability, sensory needs, cooking skills and access to food all affect what is realistic.

Protein, Iron & Vitamin B12

Protein

Vegan protein sources include lentils, beans, chickpeas, tofu, tempeh, soya foods, peas, nuts, seeds, seitan and many meat alternatives. Eating a variety across the day generally provides the amino acids the body needs. People with a low appetite may need more concentrated foods rather than very large portions of vegetables and pulses.

Iron

Plant foods can provide iron, but plant iron is less readily absorbed than iron from meat. Useful sources include pulses, fortified breakfast cereals, wholemeal bread and flour, dark green vegetables, nuts and dried fruit. Having a vitamin-C-containing food or drink with an iron-rich meal can improve absorption.

When iron may need checking

Persistent fatigue, weakness, breathlessness, palpitations, headaches or pallor can have many causes and should not be self-diagnosed. A GP can assess symptoms and arrange blood tests when appropriate.

Vitamin B12 - a priority

Reliable vitamin B12 is particularly important because unfortified plant foods are not dependable sources. Current NHS vegan guidance advises that B12 may need to come from fortified foods or a supplement. Fortified breakfast cereals, fortified plant drinks and fortified yeast extracts can contribute, but labels should be checked because amounts vary.

Do not rely on spirulina, fermented foods or unfortified nutritional yeast as your only B12 source. If intake is uncertain, discuss an appropriate supplement with a pharmacist, GP or registered dietitian.

A practical protein check

Meal	Simple vegan protein options
Breakfast	Fortified soya drink/yoghurt; nut or seed butter; tofu; fortified cereal; oats with seeds.
Lunch	Lentil soup; hummus; beans; chickpeas; tofu; seitan; vegan protein alternative.
Dinner	Bean chilli; lentil bolognese; tofu/tempeh stir-fry; chickpea curry; soya mince.
Snack if useful	Fortified yoghurt; nuts/seeds; hummus; roasted chickpeas; nut/seed butter.

Supplements should be purposeful

A vegan label on a supplement does not mean everyone needs it. Requirements vary with age, diet, health and medication. B12 needs deliberate provision; other supplements should be considered in the context of the whole diet and UK guidance.

Calcium, Vitamin D, Iodine, Selenium & Omega-3

Calcium

Fortified plant drinks and yoghurts can be important calcium sources. Calcium-set tofu, some green vegetables, tahini and certain fortified foods can also contribute. Plant alternatives vary greatly: check the label rather than assuming all contain calcium.

Vitamin D

Vitamin D is difficult to obtain from food alone. UK guidance recommends considering a daily vitamin D supplement during autumn and winter, with some people advised to take it year-round depending on individual risk. Fortified plant foods can add to intake but may not be enough by themselves.

Iodine

Iodine requires special attention because dairy and fish are major UK sources in many non-vegan diets. Some plant drinks are fortified with iodine but many are not. Seaweed is not a simple replacement because iodine content can be highly variable and excessive intake can also be harmful.

Selenium

Selenium content of plant foods depends partly on the soil in which they were grown. Nuts, seeds, grains and pulses contribute varying amounts. Brazil nuts can contain high selenium levels, but the amount is unpredictable, so they should not be treated as a precisely dosed supplement.

Omega-3 fats

Flax/linseed, chia seeds, hemp seeds, walnuts and rapeseed oil provide alpha-linolenic acid (ALA). The body converts only some ALA into the longer-chain omega-3 fats EPA and DHA. Algae-derived vegan EPA/DHA supplements are available; whether one is appropriate depends on individual circumstances.

Zinc

Pulses, wholegrains, nuts, seeds and fortified foods can provide zinc. Soaking, sprouting or fermenting some foods may improve mineral availability, but a varied diet is more important than complicated preparation rules.

Fortification checklist

Product	Look for where appropriate
Plant drink	Calcium, vitamin D, B12; iodine if available.
Plant yoghurt	Calcium and B12; vitamin D depending on product.
Breakfast cereal	Iron and B vitamins; B12 in some fortified products.
Nutritional yeast	Only count B12 if the label specifically says it is fortified.
Meat alternative	Protein; check salt/saturated fat and any added iron/B12.

Meals, Shopping, Budget & Everyday Life

Example day - ideas rather than rules

Breakfast: porridge with fortified soya drink and tolerated seeds; toast with nut/seed butter; fortified cereal; or tofu scramble. **Lunch:** lentil soup and bread, hummus wrap, baked potato with beans, chickpea sandwich filling or leftovers. **Evening:** tofu stir-fry, bean chilli and rice, lentil bolognese, chickpea curry, soya mince shepherd's pie or a familiar meal adapted with a vegan protein.

Budget-friendly choices

Dried or tinned beans and lentils, oats, potatoes, rice, pasta, frozen vegetables and seasonal produce can form an inexpensive base. Own-brand fortified plant drinks may cost less than specialist products. Vegan meat substitutes are convenient but are not required at every meal.

Simple shopping framework

Cupboard	Fridge/freezer	Useful extras
Beans, lentils, chickpeas	Fortified plant drink/yoghurt	Rapeseed or olive oil
Rice, pasta, oats	Tofu, tempeh, soya mince	Nuts/seeds if safe
Fortified cereal	Frozen vegetables	Hummus or bean spreads
Tinned vegetables	Vegan protein alternatives	Herbs, spices and sauces

Eating out and travelling

Check whether a vegan dish contains a substantial protein source and enough carbohydrate/energy rather than assuming vegetables alone will be sufficient. For allergies, always check ingredients and cross-contamination information separately; 'vegan' is not an allergy-safety claim.

Meat and dairy alternatives

Convenience products can help with familiarity, protein intake and transition. Nutritional quality varies: some are fortified and protein-rich; others are high in salt or saturated fat. Plant cheeses in particular can vary greatly in protein and calcium. Use labels to understand what a product contributes.

Transitioning gradually

Someone moving toward vegan eating can begin with familiar meals: swap dairy milk for a fortified plant drink, use lentils or soya mince in a known recipe, or try one vegan meal at a time. Gradual change allows time to identify reliable B12 and other nutrient sources.

ARFID, Sensory Needs, Restriction & Life Stages

ARFID, autism and sensory differences

A vegan diet can be compatible with sensory needs for some people, but it can also remove established safe foods. Pulses, tofu, mixed dishes and unfamiliar alternatives may have challenging textures, smells or appearances. If the safe-food range is already small, nutrition and energy can fall quickly when dairy, eggs or other familiar foods are removed.

Start with tolerated foods. A fortified plant drink, familiar cereal, smooth hummus, accepted vegan product or predictable plain food may be more useful than pressure to eat a stereotypically 'healthy' vegan meal. New foods can be introduced separately, slowly and without coercion.

Eating disorders and restrictive eating

Veganism can be a genuine ethical commitment. It can also sometimes become intertwined with eating-disorder rules or escalating restriction. Warning signs include rapidly increasing exclusions, fear around ingredients, weight loss, skipped meals, distress when vegan options are unavailable, social withdrawal or a diet becoming progressively smaller.

Ethical values and recovery do not have to be treated as enemies. A specialist dietitian or eating-disorder team can help explore how values can be respected while protecting nutritional safety.

Allergies and intolerances

Vegan diets commonly use soya, wheat, nuts, seeds and pulses. If several of these are unsafe or poorly tolerated, meeting protein, energy and micronutrient needs becomes more complex. Professional dietetic input is particularly valuable when veganism overlaps with multiple exclusions.

Pregnancy, breastfeeding, babies and children

NHS guidance states that a well-planned vegan diet can provide required nutrients, but particular attention is needed for vitamins and minerals. Pregnancy, breastfeeding and childhood are times when B12, vitamin D, iodine, calcium, iron, protein and energy deserve careful planning. Seek qualified advice if intake is restricted or growth is a concern.

Older adults and low appetite

Very high-fibre vegan meals can be filling before enough energy or protein has been eaten. Smaller, more nutrient-dense meals, fortified foods and convenient protein sources may be useful.

When to seek help

Seek advice from a GP or registered dietitian for unexplained weight loss, persistent fatigue, suspected deficiency, pregnancy with restricted intake, concerns about a child's growth, gastrointestinal disease, multiple allergies, very limited safe foods or uncertainty about supplementation.

Myths, Personal Check-In & Further Reading

Common myths

“Vegan diets cannot provide protein.” They can, when varied protein foods are eaten. **“All vegan food is healthy.”** Vegan describes ingredients, not nutritional quality. **“Natural foods provide everything, so supplements are unnecessary.”** Vitamin B12 needs a reliable fortified-food or supplement source. **“Seaweed is the perfect iodine source.”** Its iodine content can be unpredictable and sometimes excessive. **“You must cook elaborate meals.”** Simple and convenience foods can form part of a balanced pattern.

Personal nutrition check-in

- Why am I vegan, or why am I considering vegan eating?
- Which protein foods do I genuinely enjoy and tolerate?
- Where is my reliable vitamin B12 coming from?
- Are my plant drinks or yoghurts fortified with calcium and other useful nutrients?
- Have I considered vitamin D and iodine?
- Am I eating enough energy, rather than only large volumes of vegetables?
- Have I removed safe foods without finding acceptable replacements?
- Is vegan eating supporting my wellbeing, or is food becoming more fearful and restrictive?
- Would a registered dietitian help me adapt vegan eating around sensory needs, allergies or health conditions?

A message from Space to Breathe Therapy

Your food choices can reflect deeply held values and still need to care for your body. Vegan eating does not have to be perfect, complicated or performative. It can include simple foods, convenience foods, fortified products and supplements. If your choices are becoming stressful, restrictive or difficult to sustain, asking for support is not a failure of your values - it is part of looking after yourself.

Evidence and further reading

NHS - The vegan diet: current UK guidance covering balanced vegan eating and nutrients that may be harder to obtain, including vitamin B12, iodine, selenium, calcium, iron and vitamin D.

NHS - Eating a balanced diet: UK guidance on food groups, starchy foods, fruit and vegetables, protein foods, dairy alternatives and unsaturated fats.

NHS - Vitamins and minerals / Vitamin D: UK public-health advice on vitamin D supplementation and nutrient sources.

British Dietetic Association: dietitian-produced information on vegetarian, vegan and plant-based diets, including practical nutrient planning and fortified foods.

Educational information only. This guide is not a diagnosis, personalised meal plan or substitute for medical or dietetic advice.