Plant-Based Diet

A practical guide to eating more plants while protecting protein, iron, calcium, B12 and overall nourishment

Plant-based eating places plant foods at the centre of the diet. It may be completely vegan, mostly plant-based with some animal foods, or simply a way of increasing vegetables, fruit, pulses, wholegrains, nuts and seeds. There is no single definition, so the nutritional quality of the actual foods chosen matters more than the label.

Plant-based is not automatically vegan

Some people use 'plant-based' to mean fully vegan; others use it for a predominantly plant diet that still includes small amounts of dairy, eggs, fish or meat. Being clear about what you personally mean helps with nutritional planning.

Foods at the centre

Group	Examples
Pulses	Beans, lentils, chickpeas and peas.
Wholegrains/starches	Oats, wholegrain bread, brown rice, quinoa, potatoes and pasta.
Vegetables and fruit	Fresh, frozen, tinned or dried varieties as appropriate.
Protein-rich plant foods	Tofu, tempeh, soya products, pulses, nuts and seeds.
Fats	Olive/rapeseed oil, avocado, nuts and seeds where safe.

The aim is addition, not just removal

A nourishing transition asks what foods are being added to replace nutrients previously supplied by animal foods. Simply removing meat or dairy without replacing protein, calcium, iodine, B12 and energy can create gaps.

Protein, Iron, B12, Calcium & Iodine

Protein

Plant foods can provide enough protein when total food intake is adequate and varied. Beans, lentils, chickpeas, tofu, tempeh, soya foods, nuts, seeds and grains all contribute. People do not need to perfectly combine proteins at every meal.

Iron

Plant iron is less readily absorbed than haem iron from meat. Pulses, fortified cereals, tofu, seeds and leafy vegetables can contribute. Vitamin C-rich foods eaten with meals can improve absorption.

Vitamin B12

Vitamin B12 needs special attention in a fully vegan diet because reliable natural plant sources are not generally available. Fortified foods and/or an appropriate supplement are normally required.

Calcium

Fortified plant drinks and yoghurts, calcium-set tofu, some leafy vegetables, sesame/tahini and other foods can contribute. Check labels because not all plant alternatives are fortified.

Iodine

Iodine can become low when dairy and fish are removed. Some plant drinks are fortified with iodine, but many are not. Seaweed can contain highly variable and sometimes excessive iodine, so it is not a simple substitute.

Omega-3 and vitamin D

Walnuts, chia, flax/linseed and rapeseed oil provide ALA omega-3. Algae-derived DHA/EPA supplements are available for those who need them. In the UK, vitamin D supplementation is commonly recommended during autumn and winter, with some people advised to supplement year-round.

Building Satisfying Plant-Based Meals

Breakfast

Porridge made with fortified soya drink plus fruit and seeds; wholegrain toast with peanut/nut butter where safe; fortified cereal with plant milk; tofu scramble; yoghurt alternative with oats and fruit.

Lunch

Lentil soup with bread; hummus and roasted vegetable wrap; chickpea salad; bean chilli leftovers; baked potato with beans; tofu grain bowl.

Dinner

Lentil bolognese, bean chilli, tofu stir-fry, chickpea curry, vegetable and bean traybake, tempeh bowl, dhal with rice or pasta with a pulse-based sauce.

A balanced framework

Part	Think about
Protein	A clear protein source such as tofu, beans, lentils, tempeh or soya.
Carbohydrate	Potatoes, grains, bread, pasta, rice or another tolerated staple.
Vegetables/fruit	Variety, colour and forms that are realistic for you.
Fat	Oil, avocado, nuts/seeds where safe or another suitable source.
Fortification	Plant milks/yoghurts and cereals can help supply calcium, B12, iodine or vitamin D depending on product.

Enough energy matters

Plant-rich diets can be bulky and high in fibre. Someone with a small appetite may become full before meeting energy needs. Oils, spreads, avocado, suitable nuts/seeds, tofu and more energy-dense foods can help where appropriate.

Shopping, Budget, Convenience & Eating Out

A useful shopping basket

Cupboard	Fridge/freezer
Tinned beans, chickpeas and lentils	Tofu, tempeh or other protein alternatives
Wholegrains, rice, pasta and oats	Fortified plant drink/yoghurt
Tinned tomatoes and vegetables	Frozen vegetables and fruit
Seeds/nuts where safe	Fresh vegetables and fruit
Herbs, spices and sauces	Convenient complete meals when useful

Budget

Plant-based eating does not require premium meat substitutes or superfoods. Beans, lentils, peas, oats, potatoes, rice, pasta, frozen vegetables and tinned foods can form an affordable foundation.

Meat alternatives

Plant burgers, sausages and mince can be useful for familiarity and convenience. Nutritional profiles vary, so consider protein, salt, saturated fat and fortification rather than assuming every product is automatically healthier.

Plant milks

Soya drink is typically higher in protein than many oat, rice or nut drinks. Choose unsweetened fortified products where appropriate and check calcium, B12, vitamin D and iodine on the label.

Eating out

Check whether a meal contains a meaningful protein source rather than only vegetables and starch. Restaurants increasingly offer plant options, but some can be low in protein or energy.

Gradual change

A person does not have to become fully vegan overnight to eat more plants. Adding one pulse-based meal, changing one familiar recipe or trying a fortified alternative can be a meaningful step.

ARFID, Allergies, Eating Disorders & Individual Needs

ARFID and sensory needs

Beans, lentils and mixed vegetable dishes can have unpredictable textures. If safe foods are limited, removing familiar animal foods may reduce intake further. Start from tolerated textures and brands; nutrition needs to remain achievable.

Autism and predictability

A gradual approach can protect routine. Visually similar alternatives do not necessarily taste or feel similar, so substitution should not be assumed to be easy.

Allergies

Soya, peanuts, tree nuts and sesame are common ingredients in plant-based foods and can be serious allergens. A person avoiding several plant proteins may need specialist dietetic support before further restriction.

Eating disorders and restrictive eating

Plant-based eating can be values-led and nourishing, but it can also be used to disguise or extend food restriction. Warning signs include an ever-growing list of forbidden foods, anxiety about eating outside the home, inadequate energy, weight loss or moral judgement attached to food.

Children, pregnancy and breastfeeding

Well-planned vegetarian and vegan diets can be nutritionally adequate, but these life stages need particular attention to energy, protein, B12, iron, iodine, calcium, vitamin D and omega-3. Individual professional guidance can be valuable.

Digestive changes

Increasing pulses and fibre quickly can cause bloating or wind. Increase gradually, drink adequately and use portions that your digestive system tolerates.

A plant-based diet works best when it is built around nourishment and replacement, not simply around taking foods away.

Myths, Personal Check-In & Sources

Common myths

“Plant-based means vegan.” Not always. **“You cannot get enough protein from plants.”** A varied, adequate diet can provide sufficient protein. **“Vegan automatically means healthy.”** Nutritional quality still varies. **“Plants provide reliable B12.”** Fully vegan diets need reliable fortified foods and/or supplementation. **“Plant-based eating must be expensive.”** Pulses, grains and frozen/tinned produce can be economical.

Personal check-in

- What does plant-based mean for me?
- Am I adding nourishing replacements rather than only removing foods?
- Do my meals contain a clear protein source?
- If I am fully vegan, do I have a reliable source of vitamin B12?
- Are my plant milks or yoghurts fortified with the nutrients I need?
- Am I getting enough iron, calcium, iodine, vitamin D and omega-3?
- Am I eating enough total energy for my needs?
- Do ARFID, allergies or sensory needs make further restriction risky?
- Is this eating pattern flexible, enjoyable and sustainable?

A message from Space to Breathe Therapy

Eating more plants can be a positive and nourishing choice, but it does not need to be perfect or all-or-nothing. Your food needs to work for your body, your sensory needs, your budget, your health and your life. Adding variety gently can be just as meaningful as making a dramatic change.

Evidence and further reading

NHS: vegetarian and vegan diet guidance, including B12, iron, calcium, vitamin D and balanced eating.

British Dietetic Association: evidence-based guidance on vegetarian and plant-based diets.

British Nutrition Foundation: information on plant-based eating, protein and micronutrients.

Vegan nutrition guidance: reliable B12 intake and appropriate fortification/supplementation are important for fully vegan diets.

Educational information only. This guide does not replace personalised medical or dietetic advice, particularly for children, pregnancy, multiple allergies, ARFID or restrictive eating.