

Eating Well for Vegetarian Athletes



When a vegetarian eating pattern is well planned it can meet your nutrient needs for training and competition. Care must be taken, however, to get enough energy and to replace key nutrients found in animal products.

Energy (Calories)

Vegetarians usually eat A LOT of fibre. Fibre can fill you up fast and make it hard to eat enough. How many calories you need depends on factors like body size, gender and your specific sport and training level. If you find it hard to gain or maintain your weight, you may need to eat more.

Try to:

- Eat more frequent meals and snacks.
- Sip on liquids like smoothies, milk or fortified soy beverages and 100% juices.

- Carry snacks with you. Nuts, seeds and dried fruits like raisins and apricots have a lot of energy (calories).

Protein

When you avoid animal products, you need to find another source of protein. Plant proteins aren't as well digested or complete as animal proteins, so choose a variety of different types of protein foods every day. Take a look at the following table for the protein content of various plant foods.

Food	Protein (grams)
Tofu, regular, firm or extra firm – 3/4 c or 175 mL	21
Pumpkin seeds (hulled) – 1/4 c or 60 mL	19
Wiener, meatless – 1 (70 g)	14
Lentils and beans, cooked or canned (drained) – 3/4 c or 175 mL	9-13
Peanut or nut butters – 2 tbsp or 30 mL	5-8
Fortified soy beverage – 1 c or 250 mL	7
Mixed nuts (shelled) – 1/4 c or 60 mL	6
Multi-grain, whole grain bread - 1 slice (35 g)	4
Whole wheat pasta – 1/2 c or 125 mL (cooked)	4
Rice, brown – 1/2 c or 125 mL (cooked)	3

Source: Canadian Nutrient File, version 2007b, Health Canada

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This information is not intended to replace advice from your family doctor or dietitian.
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Vitamin B12

Vitamin B12 is found naturally only in animal products. If you don't eat eggs or dairy products, include foods fortified with vitamin B12 like soy beverages and meat substitutes (veggie dogs, veggie burgers).

Calcium and Vitamin D

Calcium and vitamin D are important for healthy bones, muscles and nerves. Dairy products, fortified soy beverages and some fortified orange juices provide both. Almonds, figs, beans, tahini, tofu set with calcium, turnip or collard greens, broccoli and kale also provide calcium. Vitamin D is also made when the sun hits bare skin. In the late fall or winter in Canada, our bodies can't make enough vitamin D from the sun. If you train indoors most of the time, you may be at risk for low vitamin D. Experts recommend that 'at risk' athletes aged 19-50 years supplement with 200 IU of vitamin D daily. Vitamin D3 (cholecalciferol) in supplements or fortified foods is usually from an animal source. If you want a plant source of vitamin D in your supplement or fortified food, choose products made with vitamin D2 (ergocalciferol). Check the label.

Iron

- Vegetarians need almost twice the iron of non-vegetarians because iron from plant foods is poorly absorbed. Training can increase your need for iron too. Iron deficiency leads to fatigue and can impair your performance.
- Make sure you eat enough iron rich foods every day. Choose from beans, lentils, seeds, soy, and whole grain or fortified cereals, breads and pastas.
- Include a source of vitamin C like citrus fruits and juices, strawberries, bell peppers, and broccoli to help your body absorb the iron from plant foods.
- Try cooking some of your meals in a cast iron pan. Iron will seep into the food and this is iron your body can use.
- Vegetarian athletes should have their iron checked periodically by their doctor to determine if a supplement is needed. Taking iron supplements without having your blood checked first is not a good idea. Too much iron from supplements can be toxic.

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