



University of California  
Cooperative Extension  
Tulare County

Agriculture and Natural Resources



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## TEENS & VEGETARIAN DIETS

Experimenting with a vegetarian diet is almost a "rite of passage" for many teens. Health, environmental concerns, or even peer pressure can pique a teen's interest in vegetarianism. And, while most teens will not remain committed to a meat-free diet, some will.

When teens show an interest in vegetarian diets, the best response is to provide them with the information needed to eat healthy. No doubt, vegetarian diets can be a healthy choice, but for most teens, and parents, it will mean a lesson in selecting appropriate foods and quantities.

Following is information to help you assist your teen understand the "ground rules" for a healthy vegetarian diet.

Becky Gorham, a registered dietitian with the USDA/ARS Children's Nutrition Research Center at Baylor College of Medicine says, "Parents need to respect their teen's right to consider this dietary (*vegetarian*) alternative. If they don't, it can quickly escalate into a power struggle".

To help make this vegetarian journey a healthy one, you can plan a healthy diet by using the following tips:

Talk to your teen about what vegetarianism means to him/her, and how the new diet will be implemented. The first step is working together to ensure a healthy vegetarian diet is for them to understand what each other means when they refer to a vegetarian diet. Some teens might only wish to eliminate red meat, while others might have more selective plans in mind.

Most vegetarians rely heavily on whole grains, fruits, and vegetables and avoid red

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meat. But the extent to which dairy, eggs and other animal products are avoided varies considerably. When talking with a teen about their interest in vegetarianism, try to learn which foods they intend to eliminate and which foods they plan to include in their diet.

The common classifications of vegetarian diets and the types of foods that are included in the type of diet is as follows:

- Semi-Vegetarians—generally eat dairy, egg products, fowl and fish, but avoid red meat.
- Lacto-Ovo Vegetarians—eat eggs and dairy products, but avoid fowl, fish and red meat.
- Lacto Vegetarians—consume dairy products but avoid all other animal products and eggs.
- Vegans or Total Vegetarians—avoid all animal products.

Other forms of vegetarian diets, like the macrobiotic diet and fruitarian diet, are not healthy choices due to restrictive food choices. Macrobiotic diets are generally limited to cereal products, while fruitarian diets are limited to fruits, nuts, honey and oils.

Vegetarian diets can be healthy, but they take planning. The best vegetarian diets follow the general guidelines of the USDA's Food Guide Pyramid, but feature protein-rich plant-based foods in place of meat. They also include a variety of foods, provide all the nutrients and calories needed for growth, and are not overly restrictive in fat.

Work with your teen to ensure the availability of foods they need for a healthy vegetarian diet. It's fair to expect teens to help plan their meals, shop for, and prepare special foods.

Stay flexible and creative. Building your own entrees like chef salads, burritos, tacos and pizza allows individual choices regarding vegetarian and non-vegetarian ingredients. Vegetarian entrees can often serve as side dishes for the rest of the family.

Reserve your right to veto unhealthy eating behaviors, such as overly restrictive diets and those that cause unhealthy weight loss.

Remind teens to respect other peoples' right to consume the diet of their choice. If you are interested in a suggested meal plan, please contact our office at 559-733-6363 and ask for a free copy of "What Do Vegetarian Teens Need Every Day?"

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