



QuickBites Tip

What nutrients should vegetarians be careful to include when planning their menus? How can non-vegetarians benefit from eating meatless a couple times per week?

Healthy, balanced menus can be either vegetarian or non-vegetarian. All foods, except for fruits, contain some protein. Therefore, if you eat a variety of foods throughout the day, you will likely get the protein your body needs for building and repair. However, you don't want to forget about the other vital nutrients that your body needs in addition to protein.

Animal sources provide high quality proteins that are easily utilized by the body and they come packaged with other important vitamins and minerals. Plant sources also can provide quality proteins and are high in fiber and disease fighting phytonutrients, and are lower in saturated fat and cholesterol.

Vegetarians need to be careful to avoid nutrient deficiencies. Vegetarians who include dairy and/or eggs are less likely to have deficiencies than strict vegetarians or vegans. Strict vegetarians run some risk of having low intakes of calcium, vitamin D, iron and vitamin B12. This can be easily overcome by including fortified soy or rice milk, fortified cereals, fortified juices, nuts, seeds, legumes, plenty of vegetables, and whole grains instead of processed grains. (Vegetarians who have food allergies or sensitivities will have a more difficult time navigating plant protein options.)

Vegetarians should also be aware of complementary proteins and how to combine foods throughout the day to get the necessary amino acids to meet their needs. As proteins are the building blocks of the body, amino acids are the building blocks of proteins. Some amino acids are non-essential, which means our body is able to make them. Other amino acids are essential, which means our body is unable to make them and therefore, we need to get them from the foods we eat.

Animal foods are complete proteins because they contain all the necessary amino acids. Plant foods are generally incomplete proteins (except for soy and quinoa), and lack at least 1 essential amino acid. When 2 incomplete proteins are combined to provide all the essential amino acids, they are called complementary proteins.

Research has shown that we don't need to combine these complementary proteins at each meal, but we can eat them throughout the day to meet our needs. However, many cultures combine these foods naturally in meals, such as rice & lentils, rice & beans, corn & beans, or peanut butter on whole wheat bread. **Whole grains combined with legumes are a great source of a complete protein.**

Legumes are a power packed food that come from the family of plants that produce a pod with seeds inside. Not only are they an inexpensive, great source of protein, but they are high in fiber making them very filling and therefore helpful for weight loss. They also can help to improve colon health and help to prevent colon cancer, and they are effective in moderating blood sugar levels after meals to help control diabetes. Legumes contain some anti-nutrients that can interfere with the digestion and absorption of other nutrients. Processing and properly preparing (soaking and boiling) legumes helps to neutralize these effects.

(over)

You don't have to be a vegetarian or vegan to reap the health benefits of a plant-based diet.

Even meat lovers can benefit from 1 or 2 vegetarian nights, which may reduce your risk for developing cancer, diabetes and heart disease.

Try this easy, fiber-filled, fast dinner with the winning combination of legumes and whole grains. (Serve with some crusty bread, a small glass of red wine (3 ounces), and a side of your favorite fresh fruit to balance out the meal.)

Mediterranean Pasta with Spinach and Beans

12 ounces Whole Wheat Rotini, Ziti or Penne Pasta
2 tablespoons Extra-Virgin Olive Oil
2 Garlic Cloves, minced
1-15 ounce Can Cannellini Beans (rinsed and drained to reduce the sodium content)
4-6 cups Chopped Baby Spinach Leaves
½ cup (2 ounces) Grated Parmesan Cheese
Salt and Pepper
Drizzle of Extra-Virgin Olive Oil
2-3 Medium Tomatoes, diced

Cook the pasta according to package directions. While the pasta is cooking, heat the olive oil in a skillet, add the garlic and cook over medium heat for 3 minutes, stirring frequently. Add the spinach and cook until wilted. Add the beans, reduce the heat to low and cook, stirring occasionally until the pasta is ready. Scoop the pasta out of the cooking water with a colander spoon and combine with the spinach and beans. If necessary, add some pasta cooking water to add moisture and produce a sauce. Spoon onto a serving dish and top with the diced tomatoes, a drizzle of olive oil, parmesan cheese and salt and pepper.

(5 servings - 420 calories, 23 grams protein, 15 grams fiber/serving)

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