

Vegetarian eating and pregnancy

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A vegetarian diet can meet the needs of your pregnancy as long as you take care to include enough protein, iron, vitamin B12 and calcium-containing foods.

Nuts, eggs, seeds and legumes (dried beans and lentils) and foods derived from them, such as tofu and hommos, are good sources of protein. You will need one to two serves per day.

While eggs, nuts, seeds and legumes also contain iron, it is not as easily absorbed by the body as the iron contained in meat, so vegetarians also need to eat other iron-enriched foods.

Iron-enriched foods include:

- cereals; especially wholegrain cereals, iron-enriched breakfast cereals and wholemeal breads
- green leafy vegetables like spinach or bok choy
- Milo and Ovaltine.

Foods which are rich in vitamin C will increase your body's ability to absorb iron from iron-rich foods – so every meal should contain both iron-rich foods and foods rich in vitamin C.

Vitamin C enriched foods include:

- fruits, such as berries, oranges, kiwifruit and mango
- vegetables, such as capsicum, tomato, cabbage, broccoli, cauliflower, and brussels sprouts.

Dairy

Dairy foods are the best source of calcium, which is very important for your developing baby. It is also important for your own bone health during pregnancy and after.

If you don't normally eat dairy foods you will need either a calcium-fortified soy milk or a calcium supplement.

Vitamin B12

Vitamin B12 is only found in foods of animal origin, so vegans or long-term vegetarians are at risk of Vitamin B12 deficiency. B12 is needed for the formation of blood cells and nerve function and is necessary for normal mental development in the baby. Although only small amounts of B12 are normally needed and the body can store enough for several years, pregnancy and breastfeeding can rapidly deplete these stores.

Breastfed babies of vegan mothers are particularly at risk of B12 deficiency. If you exclude all animal foods from your diet you will need to drink vitamin B12 fortified soy milk or take a B12 supplement. Please discuss this with your dietitian or doctor.

If you are vegetarian and planning pregnancy may need to have extra vitamin B12 prior to conception to build up your body stores. This can be checked with a blood test.

More information?

If you are a patient at the Women's you can ask to speak to one of our dietitians. Most maternity hospitals offer this service.

See also:

- Nutrition for vegetarian pregnant and breastfeeding mothers http://www.health.qld.gov.au/nutrition/resources/antenatal_veget.pdf
- Nutrition for vegan pregnant and breastfeeding mothers http://www.health.qld.gov.au/nutrition/resources/antenatal_vegan.pdf

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