



Vegan Diets—Health Benefits

A vegan diet can provide many health benefits.

Vegans have:

- 3/4–1/2 lower rates of high blood pressure^{1,2}
- 2/3 lower risk of type-2 diabetes³
- 15–20% lower risk of cancer^{4,5}
- Significantly lower cholesterol levels⁶

In addition to potential health improvements, keep in mind that eating vegan is always a win because of its benefits for the animals and the planet. Our friend Ginny Messina at TheVeganRD.com says it well—

“If your blood pressure and cholesterol levels drop, those are nice bonuses. However, if you somehow don’t find yourself with more energy, clear skin, and the slender waist you were expecting, it doesn’t mean a vegan diet ‘doesn’t work.’ A vegan diet always works because it always reduces your contribution to animal exploitation and it lessens your impact on climate change.”

With the numerous benefits of a vegan diet, it’s no wonder more people are choosing plant-based foods! Below you’ll find our best tips to help you thrive as you begin eating vegan.

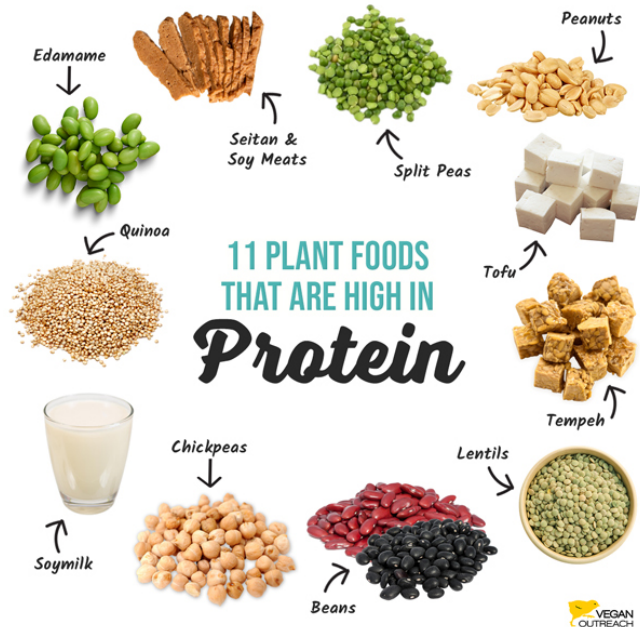
Calories, Protein, and Fat

It’s important to include some high-calorie, high-protein foods in order to feel satisfied.

Simply removing animal products from a typical American diet is going to leave you with mostly low-

calorie foods such as salads, vegetables, and fruit. Eating only these foods could quickly leave you feeling hungry and weak, and thinking a vegan diet is a real challenge. While severe protein deficiency is nothing to worry about, not eating some high-protein plant foods could leave you craving animal products or feeling fatigued.

Legumes—beans, peanuts, peas, lentils, and soy—seitan, and quinoa are the best sources of protein for vegans. Include a few servings of these foods each day—maybe even each meal.



People tend to think of animal products, and especially meat, as “protein,” but many are 50% fat. A very low-fat, plant-based diet might improve someone’s health in the short term, especially if they have high cholesterol, but it might not be ideal for longer periods. If you’re avoiding all added fats and you start to crave animal products, it might be time to increase the plant fats.

In fact, research has consistently shown that eating nuts—which are high in fat—improves markers for heart disease⁷.

Although the research is still preliminary, it appears that some people don’t have the genetics to do well on a high carbohydrate diet⁸. For such people, an eco-Atkins diet, high in plant proteins such as soy meats, legumes, and seitan, might be a better choice⁹. Finally, if you find yourself craving animal products, it could be because you have a strong preference for the taste of glutamate, also known as umami. Plant foods high in umami are ripe tomatoes, tamari, miso,

sauerkraut, dried sea vegetables, marmite, nutritional yeast, olives, balsamic vinegar, and mushrooms. Roasting, caramelizing, browning, and grilling increase umami by freeing glutamate from proteins¹⁰.

Don't Overdo the Oxalate

Some plant foods are high in oxalate and spinach is extremely high. For most vegans, oxalate won't be a problem, but if you decide to start juicing or blending your greens, make sure you don't consistently use large amounts of the high oxalate greens—spinach, swiss chard, and beet greens—doing so can sometimes result in a kidney stone.

Low Cholesterol

In rare cases, some vegans might not get enough fat or calories to produce adequate amounts of steroid hormones, which are made from cholesterol.

Two studies have shown vegans to have sex hormones on par with meat eaters^{11, 12}, but one report showed vegan women to have lower levels of estrogen¹³.

A few anecdotal reports provide some evidence that low cholesterol might be a problem for some vegans. In such cases, increasing saturated fat, such as by adding some coconut oil, could increase a depressed libido or resume menstruation.

Vitamins and Minerals—For the Long Haul

Although a vitamin or mineral deficiency is very unlikely to occur in only a few weeks or months as a vegan, there are some nutrients you need to pay attention to if you want to thrive over the long term.

Daily Needs

We provide the precise requirements and common sources for each nutrient in our article, *Daily Needs*: veganhealth.org/daily-needs.

Vitamin B12

Vitamin B12 in vegan diets has been a source of controversy and myths¹⁴. Although it rarely happens quickly, if you don't get a reliable source of vitamin B12 through fortified foods or supplements, the chances are high that you will eventually find your health suffering.



3 VEGAN OPTIONS FOR GETTING ENOUGH Vitamin B12



Calcium

The need for calcium on vegan diets has also been surrounded by misleading claims with many vegan advocates saying that animal protein, including milk, is the main cause of osteoporosis in Western countries. Following this logic, it would make sense that vegans don't need to worry about osteoporosis since we don't eat animal protein.

The research actually shows that vegans, like nonvegans, should try to meet the same calcium recommendations as the greater population. Vegan diets tend to contain much less calcium than other diets, so we must make an effort to include good sources on a daily basis.



Vitamin D

More often than not, vegans who have severe fatigue are suffering from vitamin D deficiency. This isn't just a vegan problem as many people develop vitamin D deficiency, partially as a result of avoiding the sun. But vegans are at a slight disadvantage, on average, because we get less vitamin D in our diets. Make sure that you have a reliable source of vitamin D.



Its main functions are related to the calcium in our body, which is why it's so important for bones.

If you receive this amount of sunlight during times of the year and times of the day when it's possible to get sunburned without sunscreen, then you shouldn't require vitamin D supplements:

LIGHT SKIN: 10-15 MINUTES.
DARK SKIN: 20 MINUTES.
SENIORS: 30 MINUTES.



Iron

Iron is found in a wide range of plant foods and vegans tend to have iron intakes comparable to meat-eaters.



However, plant iron isn't as easily absorbed as iron from meat and a small percentage of women develop iron-deficiency anemia after becoming vegetarian. If you think you're at risk: Make sure to include a good source of vitamin C at meals—it binds with iron creating a more easily absorbed complex. Avoid coffee and tea at meals as they decrease iron absorption.



Iodine

Iodine is important for thyroid health, but it's a nutrient that most vegans rarely think about. Iodine is found inconsistently in plant foods depending on the iodine content of the soil. The food supply in many countries has traditionally been depleted of iodine, and iodized salt fortification programs have solved iodine deficiency in many of them. You should make sure you have a source of iodine either from iodized salt or a multivitamin or supplement containing potassium iodide. Too much iodine can be harmful so don't take much more than the RDA of 150 µg (micrograms) per day. If you normally eat seaweed, you probably don't need an iodine supplement but because iodine can be highly variable in seaweed, we don't recommend adding it to your diet for iodine.

Omega-3s

Omega-3 fats are important for the long-term health of the heart and brain. Vegans should make sure they're getting enough omega-3s—walnuts, canola oil, flaxseeds, and DHA supplements are the most common sources.

Vitamin A

There are many sources of vitamin A for vegans—especially orange vegetables—but you shouldn't leave getting enough to chance. See your options in the picture below and eat one or two sources every day.



Zinc

An average vegan diet will meet or come close to the RDA for zinc, but some people might fall a bit short. Symptoms of zinc deficiency include catching frequent colds or developing cracks at the corners of your mouth. Supplement with 50–100% of the RDA if you suspect a deficiency.



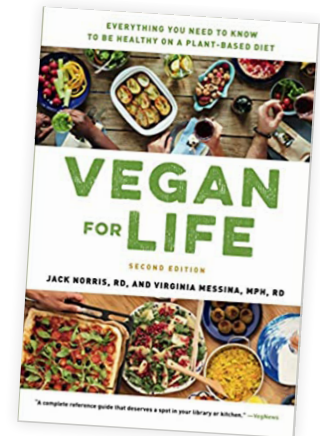
Vegan Meals

To see general meal plans that a vegan might follow to meet nutrient needs, check out:

- *Meal Plans*—Dina Aronson, MS, RD
veganhealth.org/meal-plans
- *The Plant Plate*—Ginny Messina, MPH, RD
theveganrd.com/vegan-nutrition-101/food-guide-for-vegans

Vegan for Life

Interested in the finer points of vegan nutrition? *Vegan for Life* will answer your questions and provide you with a science-based background.



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