

PROTEIN AND ALL THINGS VEGETARIAN



WHAT DOES 'VEGETARIAN' MEAN?

When someone is vegetarian, or 'veggie', it means they don't eat meat, poultry, game, fish, shellfish, crustacean, slaughter by-products or any products containing any of these things. Some vegetarians will eat fish, while others avoid eating anything that was once a living, breathing thing. A vegetarian diet is typically made up of grains, pulses, nuts, seeds, vegetables and fruits with or without the use of dairy products and eggs. One step on from vegetarianism is 'veganism'. Vegans avoid all foods containing anything remotely connected to animals, poultry and fish, including all dairy products.

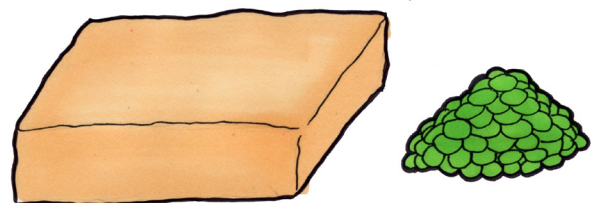
People can be vegetarian through personal choice, because of religious beliefs or sometimes because of dietary requirements. In the UK, at one point in time, vegetarianism was considered quite unusual. But as more and more people choose to follow a vegetarian diet, and travelling and re-locating to and from different countries where vegetarianism is extremely common has increased, this perception has changed. Now, nearly all shops and restaurants across the UK and many other countries cater for vegetarian diets. Because a lot of the protein and iron in our diets comes from meat and fish, people who follow a vegetarian diet need to keep an eye on their protein and iron levels to make sure they're getting enough from other sources (see below).

WHY DO WE NEED PROTEIN AND IRON?

Eating the right amount of protein is really important as it provides you with essential amino acids. Think of these as the building blocks of the body. Your body is continually building and renewing cells and you need amino acids to do this. We're unable to produce amino acids in the body ourselves, so we need to make sure we're getting enough from the protein in our diets. Iron is important because it helps to reduce tiredness and fatigue, and boosts your concentration. Red meat is a good source of iron, so iron levels can be low in vegetarians.

VEGGIE ALTERNATIVES TO MEAT

Vegetarian alternatives are a good source of protein and also contain lots of B vitamins. They are usually soya-based because soya beans are very high in protein and also contain nutritional compounds, such as isoflavonoids, which are linked to reducing the risk of cancer.



The most common and well-known vegetarian meat alternative is probably tofu, which is high in soya protein. Tofu is a great carrier of flavours and can be marinated and cooked in all sorts of ways, just like meat. Soya mince is another great meat substitute as it's low in saturated fat and is

often cholesterol-free. It's just as versatile as minced meat and can be used in stir-fries or lasagne, or it can be mixed with water then seasoned, flavoured and shaped to make great home-made veggie burgers, sausages or kebabs.

Mycoprotein is a nutritious member of the fungi family. It's low in fat and high in protein and fibre, which makes it a great choice for vegetarians. Quorn, a UK-based food brand, uses mycoprotein for all its meat-free products including mince, meatballs, sausages, burgers and even strips. These meat alternatives are great whether you want to make up your own recipe or create a veggie version of things like fajitas, stir-fries or lasagnes.

OTHER VEGETARIAN SOURCES OF PROTEIN

There are lots of other simple ingredients you can eat to give you protein. If you eat dairy products; eggs are a great choice (see *All about eggs*). Beans and pulses including black-eyed peas, butter beans, cannellini beans, lentils and kidney beans all are great sources, and are packed with amino acids. You can use these in place of mince, or use veggie mince in chilli con-carne-style dishes, if you fancy a bit of a change.

Nuts and seeds are another good source of protein and can be added to all sorts of meals: try toasting pumpkin seeds and pine nuts and scattering them over a salad, tossing cashews through an Asian-style stir-fry or adding chopped peanuts and Brazil nuts to a veggie burger mix.

For loads of really helpful information about vegetarianism, check out these sites from the Vegetarian Society: www.vegsoc.org/

www.youngveggie.org/information.html

