

VEGETARIAN NUTRITION

TIPS FOR THE YOUNG ATHLETE



SCOTTISH RITE
FOR CHILDREN
SPORTS MEDICINE

While a balanced vegetarian diet can promote a healthy lifestyle, it can also pose some risks for the young athlete.

If your young athlete decides to follow a vegetarian diet, three points to consider are:

1. Is the athlete choosing a vegetarian diet for health reasons?
2. Is the athlete aware that he or she will need to eat more fruits, vegetables and whole grains, since meat and other excluded foods have more calories?
3. Can the athlete eat a variety of plant-based foods to make sure nutrient needs are being met?



Did you answer "yes" to all of the above questions? If so, your young athlete should learn how to get proper nutrition and caloric intake for sport from a vegetarian diet. With proper planning and understanding, this is possible. Adding more sources of specific nutrients from a wide variety of foods will help the athlete feel more energized and may reduce the risk of injury.

Important Nutrients & How to Include Them

Vegetarian is a term often used to describe individuals who choose to eliminate meat and eat a plant-based diet only. There are different types of vegetarians. Some eat eggs, fish and milk products and others consume some of these or none. Because there are important nutrients a young athlete needs in meat, eggs, fish and dairy, it is important to get these nutrients from a variety of plant sources.

Protein

Important for building the body's cells, muscle development and repair

- Nuts, seeds
- Yogurt (esp. Greek yogurt)
- Milk
- Cheese
- Dairy alternatives (i.e. soy products)
- Whole grains (esp. quinoa, oats, amaranth, bulgur, buckwheat)
- Eggs
- Beans
- Lentils
- Tofu
- High protein granola bars
- Some vegetables provide a small amount of protein (i.e. peas, spinach, baked potatoes, broccoli, brussels sprouts)

Calcium

Important for bone health & normal muscle contractions

- Vegetables (i.e. bok choy, kale, arugula, watercress, collard greens, spinach)
- Nuts (i.e. almonds) & seeds (i.e. sesame & chia)
- Calcium-set tofu
- Beans and lentils
- Calcium-fortified orange juice, cereals and milk alternatives (i.e. soy or almond milk)
- Milk, cheese, yogurt

Note: Compounds called oxalates can inhibit calcium absorption. Higher oxalate calcium-rich foods include beans, nuts, soy beans and some darker green veggies like spinach. You don't have to completely cut these higher oxalate foods out of your sports diet, but try to incorporate other high calcium, lower oxalate foods, such as bok choy and kale, often.

Vitamin D

Important for bone health and a healthy immune system

- Mushrooms (may have varying amounts)
- Fortified milk, soymilk, yogurts, cheese, cereals, granola bars
- Salmon, mackerel and trout

Docosahexaenoic Acid (DHA)

Important for brain development & cognitive function

- Salmon and tuna
- Flaxseeds, flaxseed oil
- Eggs with omega-3

Iron

Important for carrying oxygen in the blood

- Vegetables (i.e. spinach, asparagus, chard, broccoli rabe, bok choy)
- Tofu, lentils, soybeans, other beans
- Pumpkin seeds, sesame seeds
- Raisins
- Iron-fortified breakfast cereals

Note: Due to phytates (compounds that inhibit the absorption of iron in the body) in some of these plant sources, try to combine them with foods high in vitamin C for optimal iron absorption. Foods high in vitamin C include citrus fruits, strawberries, tomatoes and bell peppers.

Zinc

Important for healing after major injuries as well as minor ones that can occur in exercise

- Beans, whole grains (remember these contain phytates, which also inhibit the absorption of zinc as well as iron)
- Soy products
- Nuts and seeds (i.e. pumpkin and hemp seeds)

Vitamin B12

Important for the creation of red blood cells

- Yogurt, milk and cheese
- Eggs
- Nutritional yeast
- Dried seaweed
- Shitake mushrooms
- Fortified breakfast cereals

Contact your physician and a registered dietitian if your young vegetarian athlete experiences any of the following:

- Fatigue
- Injury
- Stress fractures
- Issues with growth & development

Note: If your young athlete is vegan or does not eat any animal products, including dairy and eggs, he or she should speak with a pediatrician about vitamin B12 supplementation.

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The Center for Excellence in Sports Medicine at Scottish Rite for Children is a comprehensive practice specializing in the treatment of sport-related injuries and conditions in young and growing athletes. Sports Medicine physicians, pediatric orthopedic surgeons, physical therapists, athletic trainers, psychologists and others work side by side with athletes, parents and coaches to develop the best game plan for recovery.

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