

Vegetarian feeding guidelines for babies and toddlers

A vegetarian diet can be a healthy eating pattern for people of all ages, including babies and toddlers.

This handout provides information about eating well while following a lacto-ovo vegetarian eating pattern during early childhood.

What do I offer my child to eat?

A lacto-ovo vegetarian eating pattern:

- Includes whole grains, vegetables, fruit, legumes, nuts and seeds and some animal-based foods like eggs and dairy products
- Excludes animal meat, poultry, fish and seafood

Most babies are ready to start solid foods around 6 months old. Your child can eat many of the same foods enjoyed by the rest of the family. Provide a variety of foods that:

- Are prepared to a safe texture. Offer new textures as your baby gets older
- Have different tastes and colours
- Are made with little or no added salt or sugar

See [HealthLinkBC File #69c: Baby's first foods](#) for information on introducing solid foods. For example: when to start offering solids, safe textures, when to introduce common food allergens, how much food to offer and more. Some of the food examples may not fit into a lacto-ovo vegetarian eating pattern.

Balanced meal and snack ideas

Below are sample meals and snacks that include foods suitable for babies and toddlers following a lacto-ovo vegetarian eating pattern. Prepare foods so that they're a safe size and texture for your child:

Breakfast ideas	
6-12 months	One year and older
• Scrambled eggs, mashed avocado, whole grain toast, cut into small pieces or strips • Low-salt cottage cheese, apple sauce, rice puffs • Oatmeal with chia and hemp seeds, and mashed blueberries	• Whole grain toast with thinned tahini and sliced banana • Vegetable and cheese omelet with unsweetened o-shaped oat cereal • Muffins made with iron fortified infant cereal topped with plain yogurt
Lunch and dinner ideas	
6-12 months	One year and older
• Mixed vegetable soup, blended with white beans • Cheesy rice with grated cauliflower or carrot • Hummus or mashed edamame spread on unsalted crackers, mashed strawberries	• Congee (rice porridge) with small pieces of tofu and cooked baby bok choy • Chickpea pasta, broccoli cooked with olive oil, marinara sauce • Cooked quinoa mixed with hummus and steamed bell pepper strips
Snack ideas	
6-12 months	One year and older
• Plain yogurt topped with blueberry puree • Shredded cheese with cooked pear, mashed	• Banana rolled in hemp seeds • Bell peppers, cut in strips, with yogurt dip, hummus or other bean dip

For more meal and snack ideas, see:

- [Canada's Food Guide Kitchen](#). Here you'll find vegetarian recipes for toddlers 2 years of age and older, tips for cooking with plant-based protein foods and more.

What do I offer my child to drink?

Continue to offer your child human milk (breastmilk) with complementary foods until 2 years of age or older.

6 to 12 months

If you offer your baby infant formula, store-bought formula made from cow milk is recommended for most babies. When offering infant formula to your baby, continue until they're 9 to 12 months of age.

Sips of plain water can be offered from an open cup after 6 months, but it should not replace human milk or formula.

Pasteurized homogenized (3.25% M.F.) cow milk can be introduced to your baby at 9 to 12 months of age if they're eating a variety of iron-rich foods.

One to 2 years

Continue to offer water from an open cup in between meals for thirst. If your toddler is not receiving human milk, offer 2 cups (500 mL) of cow milk every day as part of meals and snacks. Limit daily cow milk to no more than 3 cups (750 mL) as drinking too much will leave little room for solids and can interfere with iron absorption.

2 years and older

After the age of 2, you may offer other beverage options like skim, 1% and 2% cow milk and plain fortified soy beverage. Do not offer these drinks to your child before 2 years of age as they do not have enough fat and energy to support growth and development.

Can I offer my child plant-based beverages other than soy?

Fortified plant-based beverages such as almond, rice, coconut, and oat have less fat, energy, and

protein than pasteurized homogenized (3.25% M.F.) cow milk and fortified soy beverage. They're not suitable alternatives for children under the age of 2. Only offer them if your child is over 2 and gets enough fat, energy, and protein from other foods.

Can I offer my child juice?

Do not give sugary drinks like 100% fruit juice, fruit flavoured drinks and sweetened milk to your child. They can cause tooth decay and replace more nutritious foods and drinks. Give water for thirst between meals and snacks.

After one year of age, if you choose to give 100% fruit juice, use an open cup and limit to no more than a half cup (125 mL) a day.

Will my child get enough key nutrients on a lacto-ovo vegetarian diet?

When well-planned, a lacto-ovo vegetarian eating pattern can provide enough energy and nutrients for your child's growth and development. Some parents may worry that their child will not get enough protein, but protein is in many foods, not just animal meat. Dairy foods, eggs, legumes, and nuts and seeds are all good sources of protein. Your child can meet their protein needs by eating a variety of these foods each day.

Nutrients to pay attention to include iron, zinc, vitamin B12, omega-3 fatty acids, calcium and vitamin D. Plan meals and snacks around foods with these key nutrients.

Iron

Iron helps the body make red blood cells, which is important for growth and brain development. It also carries oxygen from the lungs to the rest of the body. **Include iron-rich foods in your child's meals and snacks a few times each day starting at 6 months of age.** These include:

- Iron-fortified infant cereals and grains like quinoa, millet and spelt
- Beans, peas, and lentils

- Tofu, firm or extra firm, or edamame
- Eggs
- Smooth/thinned nut and seed butters like almond and pumpkin seed

To increase absorption of plant-based iron sources, pair iron-rich foods with foods high in vitamin C:

- Orange, grapefruit
- Kiwi, strawberry and cantaloupe
- Cauliflower, red pepper and broccoli

Zinc

Zinc supports normal growth and development. It's also needed for a healthy immune system. Zinc is found in:

- Human milk
- Store-bought infant formula
- Pasteurized cow milk
- Tahini (sesame seed butter)
- Pumpkin seeds
- Beans, peas and lentils
- Grains like quinoa, millet and spelt
- Cheese and plain yogurt

Vitamin B12

Vitamin B12 helps keep nerves and red blood cells healthy. It's only found naturally in animal foods. Sources of vitamin B12 on a vegetarian diet include:

- Human milk
- Store-bought infant formula
- Pasteurized cow milk
- Eggs
- Cheese and plain yogurt
- Vitamin B12 fortified foods like nutritional yeast, tofu and plain soy yogurt. Check the

nutrition facts table to see if vitamin B12 has been added

Speak to your health care provider about vitamin B12 supplements if your child is not having these foods regularly, or if you're vegan and are breastfeeding or chestfeeding. The milk of people following a vegan eating pattern may be low in vitamin B12.

Omega-3 fats

Omega-3 fats play a role in brain and eye development. They also provide a good source of energy for growth. Good sources of omega-3 fats include:

- Human milk
- Store-bought infant formula
- Omega-3 enriched soft margarine and eggs
- Seeds such as flax, chia and hemp seeds
- Ground walnuts
- Vegetable oils like canola and olive oil
- Soybeans and soy products like tofu

Calcium

Calcium helps form bones and teeth. It's also important for muscle function. Foods that are high in calcium include:

- Human milk
- Store-bought infant formula
- Pasteurized cow milk
- Cheese and plain yogurt
- Calcium-fortified tofu. Look for calcium sulfate as an ingredient.

Smaller amounts of calcium are in:

- White beans and navy beans
- Ground almonds and sesame seeds and their butters

- Dark green vegetables such as kale and broccoli

Vitamin D

Vitamin D helps the body absorb minerals like calcium and phosphorus that are needed for strong bones and teeth. Only a few foods contain vitamin D naturally, such as egg yolks. In Canada, vitamin D must be added to certain fortified foods including:

- Store-bought infant formula
- Pasteurized cow milk
- Soft margarines

Other foods such as yogurt, cheese, goat milk and plant-based beverages may also have added vitamin D. Check the nutrition facts table to see if vitamin D has been added.

If you're concerned about your child's eating habits, or their growth and development, speak to your health care provider.

How can I make sure my child gets all key nutrients?

- Be aware of fibre. Vegetarian meals and snacks can be high in fibre, which can fill up a child's small stomach quickly. This can make it hard for children to get enough energy. To help lower fibre intake, try using refined grains such as white flour or white rice in place of some whole grains. For example, mix half white flour and half whole grain flour in baking
- Add energy-dense foods like avocado, olive oil, high fat plain yogurt, cheese, nut butters and seeds in every meal and snack. Even very small portions of these foods provide a good source of calories and nutrients
- Provide structured snack times in between meals. By one year, offer 3 meals and 2 to 3 snacks daily. Children have small stomachs and tend to eat small portions

- Avoid grazing. After the age of one, do not offer foods and drinks other than water in between structured meal and snack times
- Limit cow milk to no more than 750 mL (3 cups) per day. Drinking too much will leave little room for solids
- Give your child a daily 400 IU vitamin D supplement if they're fed human milk

For more information

Call **8-1-1** to speak to a HealthLink BC registered dietitian if you have questions about feeding your child.

- [HealthLink BC File #69h: Feeding your baby: Sample meals for babies 6 to 12 months old](#)
- [HealthLink BC File #69h: Feeding your baby: Sample meals for babies 6 to 12 months old](#)
- [HealthLink BC File #69e: Meal and snack ideas for your 1 to 3 year old child](#)

For more information about healthy eating and nutrition, visit www.HealthLinkBC.ca/healthy-eating or call **8-1-1** (toll-free) to speak with a registered dietitian. For deaf and hearing-impaired assistance, call **7-1-1**. Translation services are available in more than 130 languages on request.