

Vegetarian Nutrition

Healthy Tips for the Young Athlete

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:

- Is the athlete choosing a vegetarian diet for healthy reasons?
- 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?
- Can the athlete eat a variety of plant-based foods to make sure nutrient needs are being met?



If you answer “yes” to all of the above questions, then, with proper planning and understanding, getting nutrition and calorie needs for sport from a vegetarian diet is possible. See the list below for nutrients that could be lacking in some vegetarian diets and a variety of suggested foods to include each day to get the nutrition that a growing athlete needs.

Critical 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.

Use these lists as a guide to help your young vegetarian athlete eat a variety of foods each day to feel energized and prevent injury.

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
- Some granola bars
- Vegetables (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
- Kidney beans
- 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 & a healthy immune system

- Mushrooms (may have varying amounts)
- Fortified milk, soy milk, yogurts, cheese, cereals, granola bars

DHA

Important for brain development & cognitive function

- Salmon, Tuna
- Flaxseeds, flaxseed oil
- Eggs with omega-3's

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 & Seeds (i.e. pumpkin and hemp seeds)

VITAMIN B12

Important for the creation of red blood cells

- Yogurt, milk, cheese
- Eggs

Reach out to your physician and a sports dietitian if your young vegetarian athlete experiences any of the following:

- *Fatigue*
- *Injury*
- *Stress fractures*
- *Impairments in 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.



About our Expert Taylor Morrison, M.S., R.D., L.D.

Taylor Morrison is a registered and licensed dietitian, specializing in wellness, sports and exercise nutrition. Taylor's experience as a young competitive figure skater and cross country runner strongly influenced her interest in working with young athletes. As a sports dietitian, she works with young athletes in the clinic as well as directly in schools and on sports teams. Taylor sees Sports Medicine patients at Scottish Rite Hospital and serves as the director of the hospital's Wellness department. Taylor is a member of several national organizations including the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, Sports Cardiovascular and Wellness Nutrition Dietetic Practice Group (SCAN) and Texas Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics.

