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LIFELONG HEALTH HUB

Vegetarian & Vegan Guide

Practical, evidence-based guidance to help you enjoy the benefits of a plant-based diet — while staying well nourished.



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🇨🇦 This guide reflects Canadian nutrition guidance and international evidence. It provides general information — not personal medical advice.

Content curated and designed by Mohammadreza Torbatimoghaddam, Clinical assistant

1 The big picture

When **well planned**, vegetarian and vegan diets are healthful and nutritionally adequate. They may help prevent heart disease, type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, and certain cancers. The more restrictive the diet, the more important it is to pay attention to a few key nutrients — but with a little planning, a plant-based diet can support lifelong health.

Plant-based eating works best when it centres on **vegetables, fruits, whole grains, legumes, nuts, and seeds** — not ultra-processed "plant-based" snacks, which don't carry the same benefits.

2 Health benefits

Research consistently links well-planned plant-based diets with:



Healthy weight — lower body weight and BMI on average



Heart health — lower LDL cholesterol and blood pressure



Disease prevention — reduced risk of heart disease, type 2 diabetes, and some cancers



Rich nutrition — more fibre, antioxidants, potassium, magnesium, and vitamins C & E

These benefits come from eating more whole plant foods and less saturated fat — not simply removing meat.

3 Nutrients to watch — at a glance

Use this table as your quick reference. Details for each nutrient are on the following page.

Nutrient	Recommended action	Key plant sources
Vitamin B12	Supplement daily (50–250 µg) or use fortified foods	Fortified cereals, nutritional yeast, fortified plant milks
Vitamin D	Supplement (especially with limited sun)	UV-exposed mushrooms, fortified plant milks
Omega-3 (EPA/DHA)	Algae-based supplement	Flaxseeds, chia seeds, walnuts (ALA only)
Calcium	Fortified foods or supplement if intake < 1,000 mg/day	Kale, broccoli, calcium-set tofu, fortified plant milks
Iodine	Iodized salt or supplement	Seaweed (variable), iodized salt
Iron	Pair with vitamin C; supplement if deficient	Legumes, lentils, tofu, dark greens, fortified cereals
Zinc	Consider supplement if intake is marginal	Legumes, nuts, seeds, whole grains
Selenium	1–2 Brazil nuts/day or supplement	Brazil nuts, whole grains
Protein	Variety throughout the day	Legumes, tofu, tempeh, seitan, nuts, seeds, whole grains

Aim to meet nutrient needs through food first; supplements fill gaps when needed. Discuss blood work with your doctor.





4 Key nutrients — what you need to know

Vitamin B12 ESSENTIAL FOR VEGANS

B12 is found only in animal-source foods. Without enough, you may develop fatigue, anemia, or nerve problems. **Vegans: 50–250 µg daily** or fortified foods. Lacto-ovo vegetarians may also run low.

Calcium

Important for bone health. Kale, broccoli, fortified milks, tofu, almonds. Aim **1,000 mg/day**.

Vitamin D

Helps absorb calcium. Supplement/fortified foods recommended, especially in winter.

Iron

Pair with **vitamin C**; avoid tea/coffee with meals. Legumes, lentils, tofu, dark greens.

Zinc

Legumes, nuts, seeds, grains, soy. Soaking or sprouting may help absorption.

Omega-3 (EPA & DHA)

ALA (flax, chia, walnuts) converts poorly. An **algae-based supplement** is recommended.

Iodine

Iodized salt or supplement. Seaweed iodine varies — use with caution.

Protein

Legumes, tofu, tempeh, seitan, nuts, seeds, grains — variety across the day.

Selenium

1–2 Brazil nuts/day can meet needs. Also in whole grains and legumes.

Quick tip — better iron absorption

Add vitamin C to iron-rich meals (lemon on lentils, bell peppers in bean salad). Save tea and coffee for between meals.

5 Bone health

Protect your bones

Some studies found vegans may have **lower bone density** and **higher fracture risk** than meat-eaters — especially hip fractures.

Risk appears lower with adequate **calcium, vitamin D, protein, and B12**. Discuss with your doctor if over 50.

6 Special life stages

Extra planning during **pregnancy, breastfeeding, infancy, and childhood**:

- **B12 is critical** in pregnancy
- **Omega-3 (DHA)** supports fetal brain development
- **Iron, zinc, iodine, calcium, vitamin D** needs increase — monitor with your care team

7 When to see your doctor

Talk to your physician if...

- You follow a strict vegan diet — periodic blood work for B12, iron/ferritin, vitamin D, and calcium may be advisable
- You have **unusual fatigue**, tingling or numbness in hands or feet, frequent infections, or muscle cramps
- You are pregnant, breastfeeding, or planning pregnancy on a plant-based diet
- You want help choosing the right supplements for your situation

Disclaimer: This guide provides general health information based on Canadian and international nutrition evidence. It is not a substitute for medical advice. Always discuss dietary changes and supplements with your physician or a registered dietitian.





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