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Vegetarianism can Work

It is becoming more and more common for young children and teenagers to announce that they want to be a vegetarian. Younger children may do this because they have made a connection between cute animals and the meat on their plate. Teenagers may have environmental or health concerns. Regardless of the reason, a vegetarian diet can be a healthy choice – especially if you give attention to a few key nutrients.

Vegetarian Diet and Health

A well-balanced vegetarian diet tends to be low in saturated fats and cholesterol and rich in important nutrients such as folate, vitamins C, E, and other anti-oxidants. Vegetarians are at lower risk for obesity, heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, osteoporosis, and some forms of cancer.

A well-balanced vegetarian diet is based on whole grains, vegetables, fruits, and low fat dairy products. Avoiding meat will not be a positive move if it is replaced with high fat

cheeses, oils, or junk foods (chips, cakes, cookies, sodas...). Of course, children will probably need to include some higher fat foods. The vegetarian diet is bulkier than the meat based diet. So, growing children generally need meals and snacks to meet their energy needs.

Vegetarian Diet and Nutrients

A meatless diet may be low in 4 key nutrients: protein, vitamin B12, iron, and zinc. A vegetarian diet that excludes dairy products may also be low in calcium and vitamin D. Below is a list of food sources for each of these nutrients. A healthy vegetarian diet should include a variety of foods from the following groupings.

Protein: soy products/tofu, dried beans/lentils, nuts/seeds, dairy products/eggs.

Vitamin B12: dairy products/eggs, enriched cereals/breads, and fortified soy products.

Iron: enriched cereals, whole grains, dark leafy green vegetables, dried beans/legumes, dried fruits.

(You get more iron from these foods if you eat them with a source of vitamin C such as orange juice, strawberries, or tomatoes).

Zinc: whole grains, wheat germ, nuts, and soy products.

Calcium: low-fat dairy products, dark green leafy vegetables, and calcium-fortified products such as orange juice, soy, rice drinks, and cereals.

Vitamin D: low-fat dairy products, fortified juices and cereal/grain products.

Children go through a variety of eating stages. Vegetarianism may be a new way of life or it may be a passing phase. Either way, try to respect it and help your family get the nutrients they need. If you are concerned, provide a standard vitamin/mineral supplement for your children.

Puffy Chile Relleno Casserole
From Quick & Healthy by Brenda J. Ponichtera

3 cans (7 oz. each) whole green chiles
8 flour tortillas (6-inch size), cut into 1 inch strips
1 lb. Grated low-fat cheese (mozzarella or cheddar)
3 cups egg substitute or 12 eggs
 $\frac{3}{4}$ cup skim milk
 $\frac{1}{2}$ tsp. each: pepper, cumin, garlic powder
 $\frac{1}{4}$ tsp. salt (optional)
salsa (optional)

Preheat oven to 350°F. Drain chiles and remove seeds. Spray a 9 x 13 inch pan with non-stick coating. Lay half the chiles in the pan. Top with half the tortilla strips and then half the cheese. Repeat another layer using remaining chilies, tortillas, and cheese. Beat the eggs together with the pepper, cumin, garlic powder, and salt. Pour this mixture over casserole. Sprinkle with paprika. Bake uncovered for 40 minutes or until puffy and set in the center. Let stand for 10 minutes before serving. Serve with salsa. Yield: 8 servings.

For additional information, contact your local County Extension Office:



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