

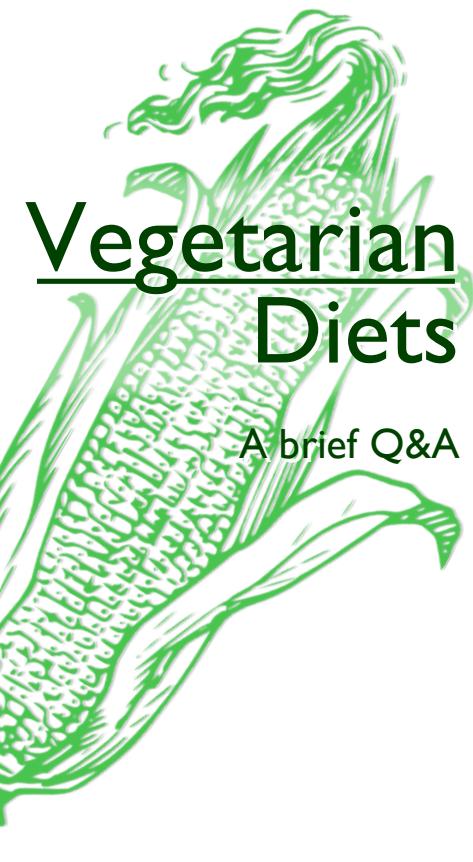
Can I be an athlete as a vegetarian?

YES. Well-planned vegetarian and vegan diets can meet the rigorous demands of athletics, including those expected of endurance sports and strength training. Numerous professional athletes in the past and present, including a number who have won Olympic medals and set world records, have fueled their physical activity on vegetarian or vegan diets.

According to the American Dietetic Association, "vegetarian diets that meet energy needs and contain a variety of plant-based protein foods [...] can provide adequate protein without the use of special foods or supplements."

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Vegetarian Diets

A brief Q&A

What is a vegetarian?

The International Vegetarian Union

Union defines vegetarianism as "the practice of not eating meat, poultry or fish or their by-products, with or without the use of dairy products or eggs." Vegans are vegetarians who avoid all animal products, including dairy and eggs, and often honey as well. Vegetarian diets may be adopted for a wide variety of reasons, including one's health, concern for the well-being of animals, concern for the environment, and/or spiritual or religious practice.

According to the American Dietetic Association, well-planned vegetarian and vegan diets can be healthy, nutritionally adequate, and appropriate for people throughout the life cycle, even during pregnancy, lactation, infancy, childhood, and adolescence. However, as with any diet, poor planning can lead to problems, so making sensible food choices is important.

Can I get the nutrients I need as a vegetarian?

YES. Vegetarians and vegans can meet U.S. dietary recommendations. The *2005 Dietary Guidelines for Americans* suggest that extra attention be given to these nutrients to ensure good intake:

- **Protein:** The richest protein sources available in vegetarian diets are legumes (including beans), nuts, seeds and grains, as well as eggs and dairy for those who include them. A variety of these foods should be eaten throughout the day so that one's essential amino acid needs are met. If care is made to include these protein-rich foods in the diet, vegetarians and vegans can easily meet their protein needs.

- **Iron:** Though vegetarians in the U.S. do not appear to experience any more iron deficiency anemia than nonvegetarians, one should still ensure good iron intake as iron from plant foods is less readily absorbed than the iron in animal foods. Foods rich in iron include beans, lentils, nuts, seeds, some dried fruits, and whole or enriched grains. Including a source of vitamin C at the same meal as iron-rich foods greatly improves the absorption of iron from plants.

- **Calcium:** If omitting dairy, alternative sources of calcium →

should be included in the diet. This can be as simple as using fortified soy or grain milks in place of cows' milk. Other plant foods rich in calcium include fortified orange juice, dark leafy greens, broccoli, some beans (especially white, soy, navy, and Great Northern beans), almonds, and figs. This mineral is better absorbed when calcium-rich foods are eaten throughout the day, rather than all at once.

- **Vitamin D:** Important for building bones, vitamin D can be made in the skin with sunlight. 15 minutes of sunlight exposure on the hands and face daily is enough for those with light skin, and those with very dark skin may need up to three hours. Since the skin's ability to make this vitamin varies with the seasons, latitude, as well as one's age and sunscreen use, one should also get vitamin D from fortified foods or a supplement

- **Vitamin B₁₂:** Produced by bacteria, this vitamin is essential for the central nervous system. The main sources of vitamin B₁₂ in the U.S. are animal foods, including meat, eggs and dairy. Vegans can meet their B₁₂ needs with fortified foods and/or a supplement.

Note: People who are pregnant, breast feeding, are elderly, or have medical conditions should always consult a physician to ensure that their unique nutrient needs are being met.