

memo

DATE: August 5, 2020
TO: WIC Coordinators and LA Staff
FROM: Carole Kelnhofer, Training Coordinator
SUBJECT: Vegetarian Diets for Children - Topic of the Month

Parents that follow a vegetarian lifestyle may choose to offer the same diet to their children. At WIC, our role is to assess and educate to ensure these children receive an adequate diet for rapid growth and development.

Vegetarian diets are based on plant-based foods and exclude meat and poultry. These diets can be healthy for children, but may be deficient in some key nutrients such as Vitamin B12 and iron. Parents need to be sure their child's diet contains essential nutrients and adequate caloric intake to ensure proper growth.

Types of Vegetarian Diets

- **Vegetarian** - May or may not include dairy products or eggs.
- **Lacto-ovo-vegetarian** - Includes dairy products and eggs.
- **Pescatarian** - Includes fish and seafood, may include dairy products and eggs.
- **Lacto-vegetarian** - Includes dairy products, but not eggs.
- **Ovo-vegetarian** - Includes eggs and egg products, but no dairy.
- **Vegan** - Excludes all animal products, may exclude honey.
(**Note:** the American Pediatric Association recommends that children only be on this diet after consultation with their health care provider.)
- **Raw vegan** - Based on vegetables, fruit, nuts and seeds, legumes, and sprouted grains. Foods are primarily if not all uncooked.

The [Position of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics: Vegetarian Diets](#) reports that when nutritionally balanced, this dietary choice is appropriate for all stages of the life cycle. When followed correctly, these diets can reduce risks of certain health conditions and chronic disease. Additionally, plant-based diets are environmentally sustainable since they use lower levels of natural resources in production and cause less environmental damage and waste.

WIC's Role

How can we ensure participants make vegetarian dietary choices that are nutritionally adequate for their children? First, use [PCS Diet Assessment Tools](#) to determine the quality of intake and identify gaps. Next, use skills developed in Participant Center Services ([PCS Counseling Skills](#)) to carefully navigate participants' dietary choices. A quality assessment

includes the use of these skills to promote sharing, to probe for more information, to illicit change talk, and to provide education and resources to help support goal setting.

Listen for indicators of diet rich in fruits and vegetables, beans and peas, nuts and seeds, and whole grains foods. These indicators can help ensure adequate caloric intake and nutrient balance.

Assessment- consider how participants are getting enough of these nutrients

- **B12:** Eggs, dairy products, fortified soy beverage and soy-based products, and some fortified breakfast cereals.
- **Iron:** Soy products, dry beans and peas, dark green leafy vegetables, iron enriched breads, WIC cereals; also peanut butter and some dried fruits, nuts and seeds. (although a caution should be included to avoid choking)
- **Healthy Fat:** Eggs, nuts, flax or chia seeds, avocado, and plant based oils.
- **Protein:** Dry beans, soy and soy products, eggs, dairy products, peanut butter, nuts and seeds. (provide choking precautions)
- **Vitamin D:** Milk, fortified soy and nut beverages, fortified breakfast cereal and vitamin D-fortified orange juice.
- **Calcium:** Fortified soy or nut beverages, calcium-set tofu, dairy products, kale, bok choy, Chinese cabbage, broccoli, and some fortified cereals and juices.
- **Zinc:** Soy products, dry beans, whole grain foods, wheat germ, cheese, seeds and nuts and zinc-fortified cereals.
- **Iodine:** Iodized table salt, some sea vegetables and dairy products.

Goals for Healthy Dietary Intake

- The child is growing at a normal rate.
- The child is getting a nutritionally adequate diet.
- The child is eating a variety of healthy foods.

Common Concerns

- **Adequate iron and B12 intake**
 - Iron deficiency is by far the most common cause of anemia in children and women of childbearing age. Anemia can impair energy metabolism, temperature regulation, and immune function; even mild anemia may delay mental and motor development in children.
 - Vitamin B12 deficiency is possible with those who avoid animal-based foods. B12 is needed for many things in the body; it is especially important in the production of DNA, nerves, and red blood cells. Long-term deficiency can lead to anemia, unusual fatigue, developmental delays, cognitive difficulties, and irreversible neurological damage.
- **Adequate caloric intake**
 - A diet high in simple carbohydrates may include many foods high in sugar and lack nutrient rich caloric intake.
 - A diet that only includes fruits and vegetables limits adequate calories and falls short in fat, protein, complex carbohydrates and various nutrients.

- Have a plan. Plan ahead to avoid deficiencies and ensure that meals and snacks meet the requirements for nutrients and calories.
- **Appropriate fiber intake**
 - Too much fiber can fill up some children quickly. If an issue, parents may use some refined grains, such as fortified cereals, breads and pasta; peel the skin on some fruits; serve some cooked vegetables instead of raw; and provide frequent meals and snacks.

Assigning Risk Codes

- For a diet consistently lacking essential nutrients and calories, use: **Women 427B for pregnant or breastfeeding women, 425F for children, and 411H for Infants.**
- If the diet is rich in essential nutrients and does not restrict calories, consider specific risk code(s) based on the complete assessment: see [Dietary Risk Criteria #400-#428](#).

It is important to address concerns about potential nutrition deficiencies (risk) without sounding judgmental to the families' choices. After identifying the participant's interest or motivation toward change, create an open environment by honoring choices with affirmations to show support and build trust.

Resources to Offer

WIC staff can suggest resources to help families ensure their child's diet is adequate in order to support optimal growth and development.

- [KidsHealth Vegetarianism](#) is a great resource that provides a breakdown of the different types of vegetarian diets as well as specific nutrient needs by age group.
- [Oldways Vegetarian & Vegan Diet](#) covers cultural food traditions surrounding plant-based diets around the world. Includes many nutritious recipes with a search list based on ingredients.
- [ChooseMyPlate Tips for Vegetarians](#) provides some tips for nutrients to focus on and optional food choices.

Thank you to Jenny Skinner MS, RDN, IBCLC from the Hennepin County WIC Program for suggesting this Topic of the Month. Please forward any future topic ideas to carole.kelnhofer@state.mn.us or email your State WIC Consultant.

References- Complete listing of Hyperlinks

[Position of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics: Vegetarian Diets](https://www.eatrightpro.org/-/media/eatrightpro-files/practice/position-and-practice-papers/position-papers/vegetarian-diet.pdf)

(<https://www.eatrightpro.org/-/media/eatrightpro-files/practice/position-and-practice-papers/position-papers/vegetarian-diet.pdf>)

[PCS Diet Assessment Tools](https://www.health.state.mn.us/people/wic/localagency/training/pcs/assessment/index.html)

(<https://www.health.state.mn.us/people/wic/localagency/training/pcs/assessment/index.html>)

[PCS Counseling Skills](https://www.health.state.mn.us/people/wic/localagency/training/pcs/skills/counseling.html)

(<https://www.health.state.mn.us/people/wic/localagency/training/pcs/skills/counseling.html>)

[Dietary Risk Criteria #400-#428](#)

(<https://www.health.state.mn.us/people/wic/localagency/nutrition/riskcodes/dietary/index.html>)

[KidsHealth Vegetarianism](https://kidshealth.org/en/parents/vegetarianism.html#catbehavior) (<https://kidshealth.org/en/parents/vegetarianism.html#catbehavior>)

[Oldways Vegetarian & Vegan Diet](https://oldwayspt.org/traditional-diets/vegetarian-vegan-diet) (<https://oldwayspt.org/traditional-diets/vegetarian-vegan-diet>)

[ChooseMyPlate Tips for Vegetarians](https://www.choosemyplate.gov/node/5635) (<https://www.choosemyplate.gov/node/5635>)

[Becoming A Vegetarian](#)

(<https://www.childrensmn.org/educationmaterials/teens/article/7798/becoming-a-vegetarian/>)

[Vegetarian Recipes for Kids](#)

(<https://www.childrensmn.org/educationmaterials/kids/category/2109/vegetarian-recipes-for-kids/>)

Minnesota Department of Health - WIC Program, 85 E 7th Place, PO BOX 64882, ST PAUL MN 55164-0882; 651-201-4444, wic.health@state.mn.us, www.health.state.mn.us; to obtain this information in a different format, call: 651-201-4444