

Vegan Eating

Advice for babies and children under two

There is not enough evidence to say if a vegan diet is safe or unsafe during pregnancy, breastfeeding and for babies and children. What we do know is that the nutrition needs are very high during these times. To meet those needs you will need to carefully plan your and your child's diet and take certain nutrition supplements. If nutrition needs are not met over time, these deficiencies can lead to serious health problems. This can affect a child for life. Choosing a vegan diet during these times is an important decision. Discuss this with your doctor, child health nurse or Accredited Practising Dietitian so that you can get the help you need.

In the first year

Breastfeeding is the natural way to feed a baby. It takes time to learn to breastfeed. Take it day by day and get the help you need.

Breast milk or a commercial infant formula will give your baby all their nutrition for around their first six months. Breastfeeding (or infant formula) is an important source of nutrition for babies in their first year.

- For babies who are started on a vegan diet, breastfeeding for the first two years or more (if possible) is recommended.
- For babies being fed a vegan diet who are not being breastfed, or only having some breastfeeds, a soy-based infant formula is recommended as a milk substitute for their first two years.

If you are following a vegan diet and breastfeeding you may need vitamin and mineral supplements. Ask your doctor or Accredited Practising Dietitian for advice.

Starting solid food

- Start solid food at around six months.
- Start with iron rich foods as first foods. Try tofu, legumes and baby cereals with added iron.

Offer a variety of foods from all food groups

Plant-based meat alternatives

Tofu, tempeh, legumes and pulses, seeds and smooth nut pastes.

Plant-based milks and foods

- Full-fat plant-based milks (soy milk, rice milk, oat milk) with added calcium (at least 100 mg per 100 ml) and vitamin B12 can be used in cooking or added to foods like cereal.
- Read the food label of any plant-based yoghurts and cheeses to see if they have added calcium. Many brands do not contain any added calcium.

To help your baby grow, offer your baby these foods along with grains and cereals, vegetables and fruit.

From one year of age

Continue breastfeeding. If breastfeeding is not possible, use a soy-based infant formula as a milk replacement drink until your child turns two. Move to offering this in a cup.

Full fat plant-based milks* (with added calcium and vitamin B12) can be offered as part of family foods for example on cereal or in cooking.

*Some plant-based milks are good alternatives to dairy and others are not. Coconut milk, almond milk and other plant-based milks (without added vitamin B12 or calcium) do not have enough protein, fat and other nutrients that babies and young children need to grow well.

Helping your child grow well

Babies and children have small stomachs and need energy to grow.

- Offer around 5-6 meals or snacks over the day at regular times. This helps to give your child opportunities to eat enough energy and nutrients over the day.
- Offer your child as much variety as you can within each food group. This gives them the opportunity to get the nutrients they need to grow well.

Helping your child meet their nutrition needs

Offer a variety of foods from your family food choices.

Foods important for growth

Offer foods such as tofu, tempeh, legumes, seeds, ground nuts and smooth nut pastes at most meal and snack times. For example, pan-fried tofu, chickpea burger patties, lentil soup or peanut butter on toast. These are a good source of protein, iron and zinc.

Fats, oils, seeds and nuts

Foods high in fat help children grow, and absorb certain nutrients. Offer foods with healthy fats and oils at most meals and snacks. For example avocado, olive oil, canola oil, smooth nut butters and full fat plant-based milks (with at least 100 mg calcium per 100 ml and ideally with added vitamin B12).

Include flaxseed (linseed), ground walnuts, chia seeds and hemp seeds. These are high in Omega-3 fatty acids which are important for

brain development.

Iron, vitamin C and calcium

Good sources of iron include tofu, legumes and nut pastes. Vitamin C helps the body absorb iron. Offer foods such as oranges, tomatoes, capsicum and berries with high iron foods.

Offer foods with a source of calcium for example full fat plant-based milks (with added calcium), broccoli, kale, almonds (ground or paste) and sesame seeds. Try to offer these foods separate to foods containing iron when possible. This is because calcium gets in the way of iron being well absorbed.

Your child may need iron supplements to “top up” their iron stores.

Vitamin B12

Vitamin B12 is only found naturally in animal foods. Offer foods with added vitamin B12 for example some plant-based milks, some cereals and spreads. It is important to read food labels. It is recommended you give your baby or child a vitamin B12 supplement to meet their needs. Talk to your child health nurse, GP or pharmacist about the right supplement for your child.

Fibre

Too much fibre can be very filling, which can make it harder for your child to eat enough. Too much fibre can also get in the way of nutrients being absorbed.

Offer a variety of high fibre and low fibre foods. This may include a mix of refined (white) and wholegrain (brown) versions of rice, breads and cereals.

Growth checks are important

Take your child to have regular health and growth checks by a child health nurse or GP.

Care needs to be taken with a plant-based diet to meet a child's nutritional needs, especially for iron and vitamin B12.

An Accredited Practising Dietitian can provide advice about balanced vegan eating.

Want to know more

Ask your GP, child health nurse or an Accredited Practising Dietitian.