

## Glenn's Strategies for Well-Being: Vegetarian Children

Written by Forward Times Staff  
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With the poor quality of many of today's conventional meat products, a vegetarian diet just might be an appropriate fit for some modern children, one of three that are now overweight in the US.

A new study published in the American Journal of Clinical Nutrition suggests that people of all ages, including children, that adhere to a vegetarian diet generally have lower average body mass indexes (BMI) than others, and are generally leaner than their meat-eating counterparts. The report explains that obesity is less prevalent among vegetarians, and that average BMI increases progressively higher depending on how much meat a person eats. Vegans, for instance, generally have the lowest BMI, while vegetarians that eat dairy and eggs have a slightly higher average BMI.

Meat eaters, suggest study authors, have the highest average BMI of all. Besides simply the visible weight benefits, adhering to a vegetarian diet may also improve lipid profile, say the authors, which means that a person is less likely to experience coronary heart disease. This means that vegetarians may have a lowered risk of developing high cholesterol, or having a heart attack or stroke.

Because a plant-based diet can contain far more nutrients, complex carbohydrates, fiber, and water, than a meat-based diet, it is more likely to promote lean body mass rather than added fat, says the team. The extra fiber found in plant-based diets also contributes to making a person feel "full" more quickly than a meat-based diet would, which results in less food being eaten. "Obesity represents a significant threat to the present and future health of children and leads to a wide range of physical and psychological consequences," write the study authors. "A plant based diet appears to be a sensible approach for the prevention of obesity in children."

For a family considering a change to a vegetarian diet, or for those who want to bring up a child on a vegetarian diet, it is important to:

- Understand what foods need to be substituted in the diet as energy, protein and vitamin

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sources may need to be 'topped up'.

- Encourage your child to eat a wide variety of foods.
- Alternate wholegrain and refined cereal products.
- Combine lower energy vegetarian foods, such as vegetables, with higher fat foods: for example, vegetable fritters.
- Increase the energy value of food by the use of nut butters, avocado, full fat dairy products, fat spreads and oils.
- Give your child regular meals and snacks.
- Combine foods containing vitamin C with foods that are high in iron. For example, offer an orange with baked beans on toast. Vitamin C enhances the absorption of iron.

A well-planned vegetarian diet can be healthy for children. Young vegan children tend to be slightly smaller but still within normal growth ranges. And they tend to catch up to other children in size, as they get older.

If you are raising a child on a vegetarian diet, consider the following:

Babies who get only breast milk should have supplements of iron after the age of 4 to 6 months.

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(This is not necessary if you add iron-fortified infant cereal to the child's diet at this age.)

A vitamin D supplement may be appropriate for children under 1 year of age. Talk with your doctor about how much and what sources of vitamin D are right for your child.

Breast-fed babies of vegan mothers need vitamin B12 supplements if the mother's diet is not fortified.

Children younger than 2 years need the extra fat in whole milk for brain and nerve development.

Don't give them low-fat or fat-free milk. If you are using soy milk instead of cow's milk, make sure that it's full-fat soy milk, and talk to your doctor or a registered dietitian to make sure your child is getting enough fat.