

ADA REPORTS

Position of The American Dietetic Association: Vegetarian diets¹

Scientific data suggest a positive relationship between vegetarian diets and risk reduction for several chronic diseases. It is important that vegetarian diets be carefully planned to ensure an adequate nutrient intake.

Position statement and summary paper

It is the position of The American Dietetic Association that vegetarian diets are healthful and nutritionally adequate when appropriately planned.

The attention focused today on personal health habits is unprecedented, as more and more Americans adopt health-promoting life-styles that include alterations in diet and exercise patterns. Simultaneously, there has been an increased interest in vegetarian diets. A considerable body of scientific data suggests positive relationships between vegetarian life-styles and risk reduction for several chronic degenerative diseases, such as obesity, coronary artery disease, hypertension, diabetes mellitus, colon cancer, and others. The high incidence of such diseases in industrialized nations, as compared with other cultures, warrants special attention to diet and other factors in life-styles that may vary between vegetarians and nonvegetarians.

It should be recognized that both vegetarian and nonvegetarian diets have the potential to be either beneficial or detrimental to health. Sound nutrition planning may result in risk reduction and control of some diseases and conditions by dietary measures, whereas poorly planned or haphazard diets increase the likelihood of diet-related disorders of deficiency or excess. However, in addition to the possible health benefits of some vegetarian diets, consideration may also be given to ecological, economical, and philosophical or ethical reasons for adopting such a diet. It may be easier, as well as more acceptable, for some individuals to meet the Dietary Guidelines for Americans by following a vegetarian diet rather than a nonvegetarian diet.

¹Approved by the House of Delegates on October 18, 1987, to be in effect until October 1992, unless it is reaffirmed or withdrawn as directed in the position development procedures of the House of Delegates. The American Dietetic Association authorizes republication of this position, in its entirety, provided full and proper credit is given.

Vegetarianism, generally defined as the abstinence from meat, fish, and fowl, encompasses a wide variety of eating patterns involving degrees of animal food avoidance. Most vegetarian diets in the United States are high in fiber and low in total fat, saturated fat, and cholesterol. The most common types of vegetarians in this country are lacto- or ovo-lacto-vegetarians, whose diets include dairy products or eggs and dairy products, respectively, and for whom nutritional deficiency concerns are few. Total vegetarians, or vegans, who abstain from meat, fish, fowl, dairy products, and eggs, must ensure that caloric intakes are adequate to maintain desirable body weight, particularly throughout childhood. Vegans must be certain to include an appropriate source of vitamin B-12 in their diets. In addition, if their exposure to sunshine is limited, a vitamin D supplement may be indicated.

In planning a vegetarian diet, one should choose a wide variety of foods from the major food groups. The foods may include fresh fruits, vegetables, whole grain breads and cereals, nuts and seeds, legumes, low-fat dairy products or fortified soy substitutes, and a limited number of eggs, if desired. Vegetarians are advised to keep their intake of low nutrient-dense foods to a minimum. Consumption of a good food source of ascorbic acid with meals will further enhance absorption of available iron. Iron-deficiency anemia has been known to occur in both vegetarians and nonvegetarians. Mixtures of proteins from grains, vegetables, legumes, seeds, and nuts eaten over the course of the day complement one another in their amino acid profiles without the necessity of precise planning and complementation of proteins within each meal, as the recently popular "combined proteins theory" has urged.

Finally, those whose nutrient needs are especially high because of growth, lactation, or recovery from illness can generally meet their nutrient requirements on vegetarian diets containing dairy products. Those who follow vegan or vegan-like diets must take care to ensure adequate intakes of calories, vitamin B-12, and vitamin D. Vegetarians and nonvegetarians alike whose infants are exclusively breast fed beyond 4 to 6 months of age should give the infants vitamin D and iron supplements.