

The Vegetarian Athlete

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As a vegetarian, do you wonder if you're getting the nutrients you require for your fitness or sport activities? To meet your nutrient needs and improve athletic performance, use these suggestions from Catherine Reade, MS, RD, owner of HealthFull Living, a nutrition consulting firm in Littleton, Colorado.

1 Meeting Calorie Needs. To best meet energy demands, consume six to eight small meals daily. These feedings supply a steady energy source and are easier on the body's digestive system than three large meals per day.

2 Gaining and Losing Weight. If you consistently lose weight on a vegetarian diet, add more legumes, dried fruits, smoothies, grains, potatoes, and foods that are a little higher in fat, such as avocados and nuts. If you gain weight, decrease portion sizes of calorie-dense foods and eat more fruits and vegetables.

3 Consuming Carbohydrates. Eat about 60 percent of your total calories as carbohydrates because they supply high-quality body fuel. They are easy for the body to break down and convert into glucose (energy) for working muscles and the brain—two vital components for peak performance!

4 Meeting Carbohydrate Needs. Primarily eat the nutritionally superior, higher-fiber carbohydrates, such as whole grains, legumes, fruits and

vegetables. Many experts recommend eating 5 to 10 grams (g) per kilogram (kg) of body weight (1 kg=2.2 pounds)—or 2.3 to 4.5 g per pound.

5 Choosing Competition Carbohydrates. Consume about 100 g of complex carbohydrates two to three hours *before* an athletic event. Choose refined grains like bagels and white-flour pasta since they break down rapidly, supplying glucose more quickly to the body. To replenish glycogen (glucose stored in the muscles and liver), consume any type of carbohydrate as soon as possible after the event—40 to 60 g per hour during the first five hours after the event.

6 Picking Protein. Protein helps build muscles, produce enzymes and hormones involved in metabolism, and produce hemoglobin, which carries oxygen to working muscles. In general, make protein 12 to 15 percent of your diet. Plant protein doesn't digest as well as animal protein, so protein requirements are somewhat higher for vegetarian athletes: approximately 1.5 to 1.8 g per kg of body weight.

7 Meeting Protein Needs. If you eat dairy products and eggs, you probably ingest enough protein. If you don't, consume more servings of protein-rich plant food. While you get all nine essential amino acids (the building blocks of protein) from one animal protein source, you need to pair plant foods to receive all nine. Combine any legume or bean dish with any grain,

nut or seed. For example, eat rice and beans or pita bread and hummus. These items don't need to be consumed at the same time, just over the course of a day.

8 Eating Soy. Soy is a great vegetarian protein because it contains all nine essential amino acids with only one—methionine—in short supply. Eat one or more servings per day and choose products such as soy milk, soy cheese, soy "meat," tofu, tempeh and soy nuts.

9 Focusing on Fat. Consume about 30 percent or less of nutrients from fat. You need two types of essential fats: omega-3 and omega-6. Most people consume more omega-6 fats (found in polyunsaturated vegetable oils like corn, safflower and sunflower) than omega-3 fats (found in fish, flaxseed, hemp oil, walnuts, canola oil and dark green, leafy vegetables). Try to eat more omega-3 fats and fewer omega-6 fats. Limit saturated fat and trans fat because they are less healthful.

10 Getting Enough Iron. Iron is important since it transports oxygen in the blood and in the muscle. It is also heavily involved in the enzyme systems within the cells that produce energy. Eat iron from sources such as legumes; dark, leafy and cooked greens; apricots; prunes and raisins; whole and enriched grains; and nuts and seeds. Consume broccoli and bok choy since they are high in both iron and vitamin C, which boosts iron absorption.



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