



DIETETICS

Plant-based diets for Kids

By Kaylie Cochrane, OSCAR Care Group Dietitian

Plant-based diets are a growing trend right now, with a lot of media hype around this way of eating. With so much information out there from many different sources how do you know if a plant-based diet is a healthy option for your children?

What is a plant-based diet?

As the title suggests, a plant-based diet is one where foods consumed comes from plant sources and do not contain animal products. Animal products such as meat, milk, eggs fish and even honey are generally not consumed in this type of diet. Core foods include things like fruits, vegetables, grains and legumes such as chickpeas, beans and pulses.

There are many variations on plant-based diets:

- Lacto-ovo-vegetarians: don't consume meat, fish, or poultry but do consume dairy and eggs
- Vegans: don't consume any animal products at all
- Vegetarians: don't consume meat, fish or poultry (including eggs) but do consume dairy

Is a plant-based diet ok for kids?

When considering if this type of diet is appropriate to provide to children there are many things to take into account. As with any diet that restricts whole food groups there are both positives and negatives to this diet, especially for growing children.

Plant-based diets



Positive aspects of a plant-based diet

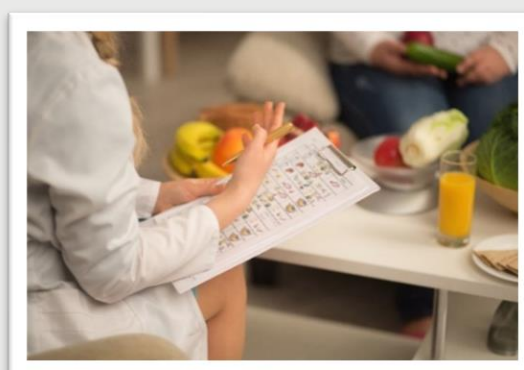
The positive aspects of consuming a plant-based diet are:

- A diet based on vegetables, legumes, beans, wholegrains, fruits, nuts and seeds can help reduce the risk of heart disease, type 2 diabetes, obesity and some types of cancer.
- The additional fibre consumed in plant based diets can increase the good bacteria in the gut.
- Plant based diets can be cheaper and easier to make budget meals for the whole family.
- Plant based diets can be more environmentally friendly by way of purchasing fresh food with less packaging that in non-recyclable.



Not-so-positive aspects of a plant-based diet:

- Any diet that is overly restrictive can run the risk of the meals consumed not containing enough energy to meet the needs of growing children.
- Many nutrients which children require for growth & development that are found most abundantly in meat & other animal products such as:
 - ✓ Protein which is typically found in meat, poultry, fish, eggs, milk, cheese and yoghurt & is essential for growth & repair in the body.
 - ✓ Iron which helps to provide oxygen to the muscles and other areas of the body, a deficiency can affect children's growth and development. There are 2 types of iron in food; haem and non-haem. Haem iron is absorbed better than non-haem iron. Almost half the iron in meat, poultry and seafood is haem iron. Eggs & plant foods contain only non-haem iron.
 - ✓ Calcium which is particularly important in children and young adults for strong, healthy bones. When we are young our bones act as a calcium bank to store calcium for later in life. Dairy products are the most abundant source of calcium.
 - ✓ Vitamin B12 which helps the brain and nervous system to function. It is only found in animal foods including milk, cheese, yoghurt and eggs. However it can be found in some soy products and breakfast cereals. Vegans need to supplement their diet with B12.



So, is it actually safe to provide children with a plant-based diet?

Yes, it is safe for children to consume a plant-based diet. However given all of the potential deficiencies that are likely to come along with this type of diet it is advisable that children commence with a dietitian to assist in planning a diet that will include all of the nutrients mentioned above.

Growing children have different requirements to adults and it is not advisable to restrict any whole food groups without proper planning to ensure your child is receiving all the nutrients they need for a happy and healthy future.

If you would like to increase plant-based foods in your child's diet here are some tips:

- Try having 'meat free Monday' as a family. Research some meat free recipes and prepare and cook them as a family.
- Instead of offering pre-packaged snacks, make fruit & vegetable snacks fun by cutting, dicing, slicing & grating different fruit & vegetables to make faces on a plate.
- Add additional vegetables to meals such as grated carrot & broccoli into rice dishes.
- Try substituting out half of the mince you would usually use in mince based dishes for legumes.



Are animal-based products 'bad for us'?

It is important to note that meat and other animal based products are not 'bad for us'. They contain many nutrients required for a happy and healthy child. Some animal products however contain saturated fats which can contribute to the development of lifestyle related disease such as heart disease.

One simple way to avoid this is to choose low fat dairy products and lean cuts of meat. Note: reduced fat dairy products should not be provided to children under the age of 2 years.

If you would like your child to consume a plant based diet, here is a checklist to ensure your child is meeting all of their requirements for optimal growth and development:

1. Consult a dietitian first!
2. Ensure your child has a protein source at each meal. Non- animal sources of protein include; chickpeas, lentils and beans, tofu, nuts, seeds and grains such as wheat, oats, barley, quinoa and buckwheat.
3. Ensure your child takes a vitamin B12 supplement or consumes foods fortified with Vitamin B12 such as cereals and soy milks.
4. Provide your child with 2-3 serves of a dairy alternative to provide calcium each day. This could include tofu, soy drinks fortified with calcium, almonds and tahini.



5. Include fruits and vegetables at each meal as the vitamin C in many fruits and vegetables helps to absorb the non-haem iron that is found in plant foods. Fruits and vegetables particularly high in vitamin C include: berries, kiwifruit, citrus fruit such as oranges, broccoli, capsicum, cabbage, cauliflower, snow peas, kale, pumpkin, spinach and tomatoes.
6. It is also important to note that with the exception of soy drinks, non-dairy milk drinks do not offer sufficient protein or other nutrients for babies and toddlers. Australian guidelines recommend giving infants on a vegan diet breast milk or soy-based infant formula for the first 2 years.

Plant-based foods

Increasing plant-based foods in your child's diet has many benefits and a well-balanced plant-based diet is safe for children. However, consultation with a dietitian is recommended to ensure all your child's nutrient needs are being met. Particular attention should be paid to ensure children are consuming enough energy, protein, iron, calcium, and vitamin B12. Supplementation may be required in cases of strict vegetarian diets with no intake of any animal products.



Need help with creating a well-balanced diet?

This article was written by OSCAR Care Group Dietitian, Kaylie Cochrane. Please call or email via our contact details below.

Resources:

Australian Dietary Guidelines for children. Australian Government. Available from: https://www.eatforhealth.gov.au/sites/default/files/files/the_guidelines/n55f_children_brochure.pdf

Getting the best start in life: All about childhood nutrition. Dietitians Association of Australia. Available from: <https://daa.asn.au/smart-eating-for-you/smart-eating-fast-facts/children/>

Nutritional Update for Physicians: Plant-Based Diets. Perm J. 2013 Spring; 17(2): 61–66. doi: 10.7812/TPP/12-085, Philip J Tuso, MD, Mohamed H Ismail, MD, Benjamin P Ha, MD Carole Bartolotto, MA, RD. Available from: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3662288/>

Vegetarian diets in children and adolescents, Paediatr Child Health. 2010 May-Jun; 15(5): 303–308 . M Amit. Available from: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2912628/>

Vegetarian and vegan diets, Health Direct, available from: <https://www.healthdirect.gov.au/vegetarian-and-vegan-diets>

