
The Four New Food Groups

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Everyone, from Nobel Prize winning doctors to Surgeons General, is recommending a vegetarian diet these days. One report after the other shows that vegetarians live longer and have much lower rates of heart disease, cancer, diabetes and many other diseases. But just how do they do it? Do they walk through the market with charts and calculators following some complicated formula? What's their secret?

Well, it's no secret and it's as easy as can be. Vegetarians simply include food from each of the Four New Groups every day in their diet. The Four New Food Groups are Legumes, Whole Grains, Fruits and Vegetables. By choosing a variety of food from these four food groups, vegetarians follow a diet that has made them the healthiest people in town. And the best part of it all is that vegetarian food is so delicious!

Just what's included in each of the Four New Food Groups?

Legumes

Legumes include peas, lentils and all kinds of beans—soybeans, chickpeas, kidney beans, black beans, white beans, even peanuts. All are packed with protein, complex carbohydrates including lots of fiber, calcium, iron and even have some essential fatty acids. They have no cholesterol and make a great replacement for meat in your diet. Lentils, black beans and garbanzo beans are especially digestible. Try lentils in a Shepherd's Pie (page 150), black beans in a soup (page 68) or salad (page 85), and garbanzo beans in Hummus (page 51) or an Indian curry (page 177) for example.

Don't forget the many soy products which are available. Recent medical studies have confirmed the benefits of soy. Tofu and tempeh offer particularly versatile ways to include soy in your diet. See the index for many different ways to prepare these products in delicious recipes. Many of today's meat-substitute products are based on soy too, including veggie burgers, meatless hot dogs, soy jerky, fake bacon, pepperoni and bologna. Dairy substitutes such as soy milk, soy "cheese," soy "yogurt" and soy "ice cream" have also become very popular. These should all be available at your local natural food store.

Although technically not legumes, nuts and seeds also are high in protein and provide an excellent source of vitamins, minerals, essential fatty acids and fiber. Include a handful of walnuts, cashews, almonds, brazil nuts or hazelnuts in your diet several times a week, or try nut butters for spreads, dips and sauces. Seeds like pumpkin seeds, sesame seeds and sunflower seeds add nutrients and crunch to your diet. Tahini, sesame seed butter, is one of the key ingredients in hummus which is a great dip for vegetables.

Whole Grains

Whole Grains include wheat, oats, barley, buckwheat, brown rice, cereals, pasta and whole grain breads of every kind. Also included are alternate grains, such as quinoa and amaranth, which are finding their way into many recipes and quickly increasing in popularity. Whole grains are powerhouses of energy and nutrition with generous amounts of protein, vitamins such as the B vitamins and vitamin E, minerals such as iron and zinc, and fiber. There's an endless variety of ways to include whole grains in your diet. Try whole wheat toast or oatmeal for breakfast, a whole grain burrito or pasta for lunch and rice or quinoa with your supper. Everyone needs some treats once in a while, so use whole grain flour and natural sweeteners, with cocoa or dark chocolate chips if you like, to make tasty cakes and cookies for a treat. See the Desserts section for many delicious healthy recipes.

Vegetables

The range of vegetables available is amazing, and every one of them is packed with vitamins, minerals and fiber. Choose from among the cruciferous vegetables: broccoli, cauliflower, Brussels sprouts, cabbage, kale and collard greens. These vegetables are especially well regarded both for their nutritional content and for their protective value against several diseases. Green leafy vegetables such as chard, spinach, arugula and the many varieties of lettuce provide excellent nutrition in salads. Tomatoes and peppers (technically fruits) of all varieties are great for salads and sauces and are high in vitamins and antioxidants. Eggplants and potatoes make great foundations for any meal. Versatile vegetables can be served as a salad, a side dish or a main dish and can be steamed, baked or stir fried.

Fruits

There's an abundance of fruits to choose from. Examples of berries include blackberries, blueberries, strawberries, raspberries and cranberries. Citrus fruits include oranges, tangerines, lemons and grapefruit. Melons include cantaloupe, honeydew and watermelon. Tree and vine fruits include apples, peaches, bananas, figs and grapes. Tropical fruit include mangoes, papayas and kiwis. All fruits are loaded with vitamins, especially vitamin C. There's a lot of evidence that fruits help reduce the risk of certain diseases, so choose a variety of fresh fruits to eat every day. They make ideal snacks and desserts and are scrumptious additions to salads.

Putting it all together

Combine choices from these four food groups, add a few herbs, spices and other natural flavorings (oils, vinegars or sweeteners as needed) and you have everything you need for delicious and healthy meals. Look through the index. This book has many recipes which will help you incorporate these ingredients.

In addition to food, doctors recommend drinking 6 to 8 cups of water every day, as an essential component to your diet. Taking a daily multivitamin helps make sure you are getting all you need and supplies vitamin B₁₂, which is needed for diets which include no animal products.

Our guidebook *Veg-Feasting in the Pacific Northwest* contains much more information on nutrition and the many advantages of a vegetarian diet, written by doctors and dietitians. There you'll find in-depth articles on feeding babies and their mothers, and attracting children to healthier foods. There are also special sections for athletes, women and seniors. You will also find more information how a vegetarian diet helps prevent diseases such as heart attacks, strokes, cancer, osteoporosis and diabetes. For more information about this book, see page 241.

For more important information on how to buy, store and cook the foods in the new four food groups, see the Vegetarian Kitchen article on page 19.