

The Healthy Vegetarian Athlete (Part I)



There are numerous reasons why athletes choose to follow a vegetarian diet, including ecological, economical, humanitarian, and health. Regardless of why athletes choose to become, or remain vegetarians, the various health benefits have been well documented, and can be found in table 1.

Athletes exercise more than the average person and are less likely to be overweight. Many athletes abstain from tobacco and drugs and limit their alcohol intake as well. Nevertheless, a vegetarian diet is usually high in fiber, low in fat and cholesterol, and rich in antioxidants, phytonutrients, and other important nutrients².

Despite the lengthy list of benefits attributed to following a vegetarian diet, there are various myths that still persist

with regards to its appropriateness for athletes. Below are some myths and truths surrounding vegetarian athletes.

Myth: A diet of a vegetarian athlete which emphasizes plant foods, in order to enhance carbohydrate intake and optimize body glycogen stores, may lead to increases in dietary fiber and phytic acid intake to concentrations that reduce the bioavailability of several nutrients including zinc, iron, and some other trace minerals.

Truth: There is no convincing evidence that vegetarian athletes suffer impaired nutrient status from the interactive effect of their heavy exertion and plant-food based dietary practices to the extent that performance, health, or both are impaired⁷. In general, athletes take in higher calories to meet the physical demands of their sport, and are therefore less likely to have low nutrient intakes.

Myth: Vegetarian athletes can not take in adequate amounts of protein.

Truth: Data indicate that all essential and nonessential amino acids can be supplied by plant food sources alone as long as a variety of foods is consumed and the energy intake is adequate⁷. Including a variety of soy and soy products, nuts, beans, and lentils (low fat dairy and fish, if preferred) is important for an adequate protein intake.

Myth: Vegetarian female athletes are at increased risk for oligomenorrhea (abnormally slight or infrequent menstrual flow).

Truth: Evidence suggests that low energy intake, not dietary quality, is the major cause of irregular menses⁷. Taking in adequate calories and a variety of foods is important for normal menses.

When athletes choose vegetarian diets, they must plan with care to be sure that they are taking in adequate nutrients including total calories, protein, the B vitamins, iron, zinc, calcium, vitamin D, and omega-3 fatty acids⁶.

In the next issue of the *NSCA's Performance Training Journal*, we will discuss different types of vegetarians and what foods vegetarians should eat to meet certain vitamin and mineral requirements. ▲

Table 1. Health Benefits of a Vegetarian Diet

Health Benefits of a Vegetarian Diet
Reduced risk of coronary artery disease ³
Lower average blood cholesterol levels (total and LDL) ⁴
Lower blood pressure ¹
Lower obesity— hover around ideal body weights ⁸
May help reverse the effects of atherosclerosis once they have occurred ⁴
Less digestive disorders (constipation and diverticulosis) ⁵
Reduced risk of Type II diabetes (adult-onset) ⁸
Reduced risk of gallstones ⁵
Improved control of blood sugar (may be due to high fiber in diet) ⁸
Lower risk of various cancers—colon, lung, and breast— than the average American ⁸

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