

Why a Vegan Diet During Pregnancy Is Good For Your Child



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Is it safe to follow a vegan diet during pregnancy? Every vegan woman is often asked this question. There are many common misconceptions about nutrition and health when it comes to a vegan lifestyle. Dr. Nandita Shah shares with us everything about pregnancy, vegan diet and nutrition. Read on....



There is something about a pregnant belly that suddenly makes everyone an expert. Family, friends and even complete strangers cannot refrain themselves from lecturing and sharing their opinions. And if you are undergoing a vegan pregnancy then you have to deal with an extra dose of pressure coupled with unfounded health warnings due to your vegan lifestyle. So it is no surprise that nearly every pregnant vegan woman is warned by her family members, and sometimes, even the doctors, that a vegan diet would be harmful for her child. Every mother wants the best for her child and cannot risk putting her child at danger, so out of fear some choose to drop-out from their vegan diet during pregnancy. However, the truth is, there's no better time to be on the most healthy diet that you possibly can than when you're pregnant. Pregnancy means you're eating for two and you are responsible for the health and well-being of another individual and a vegan pregnancy ensures just that.

Disease is commonplace in our society. When a non-vegan falls sick, it's considered normal. Yet when a vegan falls sick, everyone thinks it's because of the diet. As a medical doctor and vegan health expert let me get the facts right – vegans are not more prone to sickness than others, in fact health conscious vegans are less likely to get sick, if at all.

A look at our instincts

Let's look at nature closely to examine what a healthy diet for any human being, including pregnant women, should be.

If you had a lion, you would only feed him meat, if you had a cow, you would feed her grass. You would never do the opposite. That's because lions instinctually know that they are carnivores, and cows instinctively know that their food is grass. A cow eating meat would not be healthy, and the lion eating grass would not thrive. But we have totally lost touch with our instincts.

Imagine if you were on a farm that is full of ripe fruits and vegetables – what would you be inclined to do? Pick and eat them of course! But if you see a chicken or goat walk by, would your mouth water? Absolutely not. You don't have the instinct to chase an animal, pounce on it, tear it apart and eat it raw. Yet we are taught that we are omnivores!

We live in a culture where we are taught to consume foods, which are not instinctual. It's no wonder we are sick!

Everyone knows that mammals produce milk for their young, and that all young mammals cease to consume their mother's (or for that matter any) milk once they grow up. We are the only species that consumes another animal's milk, and that too for our entire lives.

Does a vegan diet offer all nutrition for the expecting mother & her child?

Pregnancy is a time when a woman is eating for herself as well as her unborn. Only a whole plant-based diet can produce the highest level of nutrition for growth of both mind and body. Vegan women, who eat consciously, will find that their children are more resistant to diseases and are likely to have higher intellectual capacity in most cases. They get higher levels of phyto-nutrients, antioxidants, vitamins than their vegetarian or non-vegetarian counterparts.

Even the American Dietetic Association (Volume 109, Issue 7, Pages 1266-1282 [July 2009]) confirmed that *“Properly planned vegan diets are healthful, nutritionally adequate, and may provide health benefits in the prevention and treatment of certain diseases and are appropriate for individuals during all stages of the life cycle, including pregnancy, lactation, infancy, childhood, and adolescence, and for athletes.”*

In fact, diet only becomes an issue if you aren't eating healthy. I'd like to caution here that certain vegan diets can be unhealthy as well. For example, potato chips and soft drinks may be vegan, but totally unhealthy. Packaged, processed foods are full of chemicals. Chemicals are hormone disruptors. Of course they may not be much worse than what the average person eats, but they cannot be termed healthy.

Today we are facing an epidemic of hormonal problems from diabetes, hypothyroid, PCOS, and infertility to prostate and breast cancers. Therefore, I highly recommend a whole, plant-based diet. Further I always

recommend organic food, because pesticides are chemicals and poisons. It is not uncommon for breastmilk to be full of pesticides just because of the mother's diet is full of chemically grown foods.

What about Vitamin B12, Calcium & Proteins?

During pregnancy doctors often advise calcium and iron supplements and ask mothers to increase their intake of proteins. However, if you are eating right you may not need supplements – your wholesome vegan pregnancy diet will cover everything. Here's what you need to know about your vitamin and mineral intake during pregnancy:

Calcium & Vitamin D

There is no known dietary insufficiency of calcium known in the world. This is why people with osteoporosis do not benefit by taking calcium tablets, and why cows produce calcium rich milk from grass. Calcium is found in abundance in all green leafy vegetables, nuts and seeds. Sesame seed has ten times more calcium than cows milk. Tofu (fortified with vitamin D), sesame seeds, almonds, figs, collard greens and mustard greens are good vegan sources of calcium and would ensure you get your 1000 milligrams of calcium requirement every day. However, your body needs Vitamin D to absorb calcium, so you need to make sure that your vitamin D is not low.

Iron & Vitamin B12

This is another nutrient that both mothers and doctors worry about. Like calcium, iron is a mineral, and is found in the soil. All plants grown in high quality soil have iron. Iron absorption is impeded by the consumption of tea, coffee, calcium supplements and MILK. Healthy vegans who do not take any of the above, are not likely to be deficient in iron. However, anaemia can be the result of lack of vitamin B12 which must always be checked. Even folic acid, which doctors often recommend is not required as it's found abundantly in green leafy vegetables.

Proteins

The protein deficiency is a complete myth. Protein deficiency is extremely rare, and occurs in only in case of starvation and in some kidney disorders. In most cases it is protein excess that is the problem. If you are eating healthy and timely as a pregnant woman you will never need protein supplements. Greens, quinoa, tofu and beans are rich sources of protein.

No matter whether a mother is vegan or not blood tests should always be done, both during pregnancy and lactation. Many people suffer from lack of vitamins B12 and D. These two vital vitamins do not come from diet. Vitamin B12 is produced only by bacteria, and absorbed in our stomach. In our modern super hygienic lifestyle, we are likely to suffer deficiency of this vitamin. Vitamin D is manufactured on the skin, when it comes in direct contact with the sun. In our modern world, we don't spend much time in the sun, and when we do, we are either wearing sunscreens or are in atmosphere that is so polluted (smog) that the sun's rays actually don't directly touch the skin. Hence, many people suffer from vitamin D deficiency. It is absolutely vital to check the levels of these two vitamins, and if they are low, they should be supplemented with the help of a doctor. Failure to do this will compromise the health of both mother and child.

While there are occasional scandalous news items about the ill health of vegan children, it must be noted that parents (vegan or not) are responsible for the health of their children. Parents who drink, smoke or take drugs, or even eat junk food compromise the health of both themselves and their children. Although most vegans also understand the health benefits, there are some who do not consider this, and their children may suffer as a consequence.

VEGAN PREGNANCY & NUTRITION

CALCIUM

Watercress Tofu Almonds & hazelnuts Figs

Amaranth Collard greens Kale Sesame seeds

Other Sources
Chickpeas, spinach, sunflower seeds, parsley, pistachio, raw fennel

PROTEIN

Green leafy vegetables Oatmeal Soy Yogurt Lentils

Quinoa Chia & Pumpkin Seeds Beans Peanut Butter

Other Sources
Amaranth, sunflower & hemp seeds, green peas, nuts, broccoli, seitan

IRON

Swiss Chard Turnip Spirulina Chickpeas

Spinach (steamed) Tomato Paste Quinoa Lima beans

Other Sources
Pumpkin seeds, tahini, cooked soybeans, peas, tofu, cashews, black molasses

VITAMIN D & B12

Sunlight

Mushrooms

Vitamin D

- Take sunlight (preferably between 10am-2pm) without wearing sunscreen
- Portobello, maitake, morel, button & shiitake, but need sun exposure

Vitamin B12

- Vitamin B12 is produced by bacteria & absorbed in our stomach; it does not come from diet.
- Get your B12 levels checked regularly & if low ask your doctor to prescribe vegan supplement

Foods to Avoid

- Tea, coffee, energy drinks and any other source of caffeine impedes iron absorption and may result in calcium loss.
- Junk and unhealthy food
- Alcohol, smoking
- Milk prevents absorption of iron

Do you need supplements?

- Just because you are on a vegan diet does not mean you would need supplements, like many people will advise you.
- Consult a qualified health practitioner in nutrition to make sure you are meeting all your nutritional requirements.
- If you are eating healthy you may not need at all.
- Just make sure to get blood tests periodically.

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One should never assume health and must always recommend tests as a way to getting the clear status of health and making changes where needed. If the vitamin B12 and D is in place, and the mother is fairly conscious of her food choices, vegan kids will thrive both physically and intellectually. They are less likely to get colds, coughs, ear infections compared to their non-vegan counterparts, and if they do, it's likely to be short lived. Eczemas, asthma and other childhood problems are likely to be much less too.

As long as you are eating right, you don't have to worry about nutrients and health of your vegan child. Just do your timely tests.

Is it healthy to raise a vegan child?

Raising your child the vegan way is the best thing you can do for him/her. So to all the women who are afraid to remain vegan when they are pregnant because of comments from other people, even doctors, I say please stand up for the rights of yourself, of your child and for the future.

- There is no shortage of calcium or proteins in a plant based diet. You will be healthier than ever if you are on whole, plant based and organic food.

- Always put the highest quality food into your body and the body of your child.
- Don't believe anyone, instead make sure to get your blood tests done regularly.

All you have to do is keep a check on your vitamin B12 and D levels and you will soar! After all the rules of life don't change when you are pregnant; if anything it is during this time that you need to be on a healthier aka vegan diet more than ever!

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Dr Nandita Shah is the founder of [SHARAN](#), an organisation dedicated to prevention and reversal of lifestyle disease through nutrition.