

Vegetarian Eating Patterns in Young Children: Why Dairy Is A Good Idea

Jill Castle, MS, RDN



The desire to include more plants in the diet is on the mind of many parents. Whether it's simply serving up five servings of fruits and vegetables, adding more whole grains to the diet, or adopting a vegetarian eating pattern, today's parents are encouraged to include more plants in their children's diet.

But what about a vegetarian diet for little ones? Is it healthy for them? Does it support their nutritional needs? To answer that question, let's look at what's happening during the early years of life.

What's Happening in the First 1000 Days?

The first 1,000 days, or the period from pregnancy through age two, is a critical period of growth and development for infants and young toddlers. Many physical and cognitive changes are happening during pregnancy and early life. From growing rapidly in the first year to building the brain structure and its information and communication pathways, early childhood sets the foundation for a child's later health, intelligence, and even food preferences.

Yet, when you look at a young child, it's easy to see they're small and have limited stomach capacity for food. In other words, those tiny tummies fill up fast. At the same time, young children have higher nutrient and calorie requirements per pound of body weight due to their rapid growth. For instance, a child's body weight will triple in the first year, his length will increase by about 50%, and his head will grow bigger (by about 40%) in the first year.

The brain, bones and other bodily organs are maturing as well. This maturation relies on a nutrient rich diet. For example, babies are born with soft

bones. A diet rich in calcium, vitamin D, phosphorus, potassium, and other key nutrients help the infant's bones harden and densify, so they can have the strength and coordination to eventually crawl and learn to walk.

Iron, zinc, choline, and fat play a role in the development of the brain. And many other nutrients are needed to keep young children growing, developing and healthy. All this to say, the foods young children eat are key to their growth and development during this period of life and every bite counts.

What Do the Dietary Guidelines for Americans Say about Vegetarian Diets for Infants and Toddlers?

Recently, and for the first time ever, the 2020 Dietary Guidelines for Americans added a new category of recommendations: **Birth to 24 months.** This was done to address this critical period of growth and development and summarize what we know about the nutritional needs of growing babies and toddlers.

The DGA cover a range of information for the "B to 24" crowd, including recommendations for a nutrient rich diet in the first year, which mostly consists of breastmilk and/or infant formula in the first 6 months and solid food introduction around 6 months. They also establish healthy eating and beverage patterns, responsive feeding interactions, how to introduce solid foods and flavors, and more.

The DGA outline two primary eating patterns for young children aged 12 through 23 months: A Healthy U.S.-Style Dietary Pattern and a Vegetarian Eating Pattern. The Vegetarian Eating Pattern

describes a lacto-ovo vegetarian diet, one that includes regular consumption of eggs, dairy products, soy products, and nuts or seeds, in addition to vegetables including beans, peas, and lentils, fruits, grains, and oils.

Why Is Dairy a Good Idea for Vegetarian Toddlers?

There are several reasons why dairy foods are a good idea to include in a young toddler's eating plan.

1) Dairy foods contain 13 essential nutrients. Dairy offers a source of protein, calcium, vitamin D, vitamin A, cobalamin (vitamin B12), potassium, phosphorus, riboflavin (vitamin B2), niacin (vitamin B3), pantothenic acid, iodine, zinc, and selenium. This package of nutrients helps young children meet their overall nutritional needs in these critical early years.

2) Dairy foods like milk are an excellent source of calcium and vitamin D, which help to harden, densify, and strengthen developing bones.

According to the DGA, "In the second year of life, when calcium requirements increase, dairy products, including milk, yogurt, cheese, and fortified soy beverages and soy yogurt provide a good source of calcium."

3) Dairy foods such as yogurt, cheese and cottage cheese are tasty, also. Studies show that dairy products are well-liked by children and readily consumed. This is a benefit for parents who want to make sure their kids get the nutrition they need and enjoy it, too.

4) The DGA also recommend nutrient-dense beverages as a key to a healthy start. For infants in the first year, breastmilk and/or infant formula

are the fluids of choice. After a child turns one, nutritious beverages like dairy milk are encouraged due to its nutrient-rich profile.

Consider Dairy in Your Vegetarian Eating Plan for Young Toddlers

Adopting a Vegetarian Eating Pattern is doable, but it requires some considerations for the young toddler. Although plant foods that contain calcium, like broccoli and sesame seeds, and sources of vitamin D like salmon and mushrooms are easily available, it may be challenging for tiny tummies to get

enough of these foods to cover their nutrient needs without supplementation.

Even if you plan a nutritious vegetarian eating plan for little ones, it's recommended that parents consult with a healthcare provider to determine whether supplementation of iron, vitamin B12, and/or other nutrients is necessary to meet their unique requirements.

Make every bite count with dairy foods. They offer a nutrient-rich package of 13 essential nutrients, making it easier to match the nutrition requirements of young toddlers consuming a vegetarian diet in a convenient, affordable, and tasty way.



KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Today's parents are encouraged to include more fruits and vegetables in their children's diet.
- Young children need nutrient rich diets early on for proper bone, organ, and brain development.
- The 2020 Dietary Guidelines for Americans recommends a lacto-ovo vegetarian diet, one that includes regular consumption of dairy products in addition to fruits, vegetables, grains, and oils.
- Dairy contains 13 essential nutrients like calcium, vitamin D which help harden, densify, and strengthen developing bones, and foods like yogurt, cheese, and cottage cheese are delicious, as well.
- While plant foods can provide some essential nutrients, it is often difficult for small, young stomachs to consume sufficient amounts to meet their nutrient needs.
- Dairy provides 13 essential nutrients that help meet the nutrient requirements of young toddlers in a convenient and affordable way.

References

U.S. Department of Agriculture and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2020-2025.



P.O. Box 936 • Sulphur Springs, Texas 75483 • (903) 439-6455
southwestdairyfarmers.com