

Vegetarian Eating for Athletes

Athlete Scenario

I have been a vegetarian for over two years because I believe that not eating meat has many advantages. However, my new coach is concerned that I am not getting enough protein and iron. Aware of his concerns, I wonder whether I am getting adequate nutrients. How can I remain a vegetarian while satisfying my nutrient needs and enhancing my performance?

Strategies for Athletes following Vegetarian Eating Style:

- Meet daily needs for protein and essential amino acids by eating a variety of plant-based protein sources.
- Include plant-based iron-rich foods in meals and snacks to facilitate oxygen transport in the body and promote optimal respiratory function during exercise.
- Consume foods high in vitamin C with iron-rich foods to boost iron absorption.
- Select foods high in calcium and vitamin D to build strong bones and reduce risk of stress fractures.
- If you are vegan (avoids all animal products), choose vitamin B₁₂-fortified foods or take a vitamin B₁₂ supplement daily.

Performance Foods for Vegetarian Athletes:

- Plant-based protein foods: legumes, tofu, texturized vegetable and soy protein, quinoa, nuts and seeds
- Plant-based iron-rich foods: legumes, nuts, seeds, whole and enriched grains, dark green leafy vegetables, dried fruit
- Calcium-rich foods: dairy products, dark green leafy vegetables, fortified tofu, fortified soy milk and fruit juices, legumes, nuts
- Vitamin B₁₂ sources: dairy products, eggs, nutritional yeast, fortified foods (soy milk, cereal, meat analogues)

Written by SCAN registered dietitians (RDs). The key to optimal meal planning for athletes is individualization. For personalized nutrition plans contact a SCAN sports dietitian or Board Certified Specialist in Sports Dietetics (CSSD) by accessing "Find a SCAN Dietitian" at www.scandpg.org | 800.249.2875.



Tips to Take With You

1. Consuming a variety of plant-based foods will help vegetarian athletes meet their carbohydrate, protein, vitamin and mineral needs.
2. Choose a wide array of plant-based foods that contain protein.
3. Vegetarian athletes may be at increased risk for iron depletion and iron deficiency. Routine assessment of iron status is recommended for most athletes.

Contact SCAN

Web site: www.scandpg.org

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