

What You Should Know About Vegan and Vegetarian Diets

You may have been reading that your favorite dance star is vegan (animal product free) or vegetarian (meat/fish free) because they feel it is healthier for them and you want to try it too. Although plant based dietary strategies can be beneficial, they can also cause health issues if you don't make educated choices. This article will give you some pros and cons so you can decide what is right for you.

Let's begin by saying that all dietary strategies are not meant for everyone. As a dancer, the way you eat and fuel your body should promote great energy, a boosted immune system, muscular strength and endurance, strong bones and joints, and should be relatively simple to maintain. If your dietary strategy is not working, you may experience fatigue, illness, anemia, digestive issues, and unintentional weight loss or gain. The most important thing you can do is to always pay attention to how you feel and adjust your diet immediately without guilt or second guessing.

Scientific studies show over and over again that a healthy diet for dancers contains on a daily basis:

- 55-60% complex carbohydrates, or anywhere between 200-250 grams of carbohydrates
- 15% protein, or anywhere between 75-120 grams of protein
- 25% fat, or anywhere between 50-80 grams of fat

Let's see how vegan and vegetarian diets stack up to the above numbers:

A complex carbohydrate is a whole food that has not been processed so that all the vitamins, minerals, and fiber remain for good health. As a dancer, this means that more than half of your diet should come from grains like oats, brown rice, quinoa, millet, whole grain breads, cereals and potatoes, as well as whole fruits and veggies. It also means you are consuming a whole lot of nutrition that will help you dance all day long and keep you healthy. For most dancers, that means a quarter of your plate at breakfast, lunch, and dinner should contain a starchy carbohydrate. Veggies should fill half your plate. Fruit can round out a meal or snack. Vegan and vegetarian diets are usually high in complex carbohydrates if good choices are made. Cookies are also a carbohydrate, but contain no nutrition! Focus on consuming foods that give you something back rather than empty calories.

Protein comes from foods like meat, chicken, turkey, fish, eggs, beans, milk, cheese, yogurt, and nuts. The protein in these foods contain all the amino acids that our bodies cannot produce on its own, making them 100% usable and nutritious. However, if you choose to follow a vegan diet or a vegetarian diet, you may not be eating all of these foods. This is probably the biggest challenge to a vegan or vegetarian dancer. You do get protein from your complex carbohydrates as stated above; however, these proteins are not complete, meaning that they are lacking some essential amino acids. Your body cannot use them totally unless you include lots of beans, nuts, and soy foods like tofu which provide you with the missing essential amino acids, thereby making your protein completely usable. If you decide to be a lacto-ovo vegetarian, then you will be consuming some eggs and dairy which will give you much more flexibility in your choices and more complete proteins. We need dietary protein to repair muscle,

make red and white blood cells, make hormones, make skin, nail and hair cells, and to maintain fluid balance. It is very important for vegans and vegetarians to eat enough calories and to have variety in their choices to get the protein they need. If needed, protein powders made from peas, egg whites, or soy can be used for a bit of extra protein.

Fats are very important for the immune system and give you energy. They help make hormones too! Dietary fat also makes your food taste good. Healthier fats include olive oil, canola oil, flaxseed oil, and oils from fish, avocado and nuts. As for fats, a vegan dancer's diet eliminates meat, poultry, fish, dairy foods and any food made from an animal source (like butter). By eliminating animal products, some dancers may lower cholesterol and the fats which have been shown to cause inflammation¹.

Vegetarians generally do not eat meat, poultry, or fish; however, many consume dairy and eggs. If dairy foods are low fat and whole eggs are limited to 4 or 5 per week, it is unlikely that a vegetarian diet will contain unhealthy fats. Both vegan and vegetarian diets can contain adequate fat if nuts, seeds, and avocados are consumed, as well as using some added fat in cooking or for salad dressings. A good rule of thumb for most dancers is to have at least a couple of tablespoons of added fat daily from the healthier options mentioned above.

Here are some sample menu plans for you to get some ideas:

Vegan Diet Suggestions

Breakfast:

1 cup cooked oatmeal
1 scoop protein powder (14 grams protein)
1 cup vanilla almond milk
1 cup berries
Warm Beverage (coffee or tea)

Morning Snack:

1 cup soy yogurt
1 banana

Lunch:

1 ½ cups 3 bean chili topped w/
1 oz. vegan cheese
1 ½ cups cooked brown rice
Green salad w/olive oil based dressing

Afternoon Snack:

2 tbsp. peanut butter on apple or pear slices
1 cup vanilla almond milk

Dinner:

6 oz. marinated tofu
1 ½ cups cooked noodles topped w/Thai peanut sauce
Cooked veggies drizzled w/olive oil and lemon
Green salad w/flax and olive oil based dressing

Dessert:

Big bowl fresh fruit

Lacto Ovo Vegetarian Diet Suggestions

Breakfast:

1-2 scrambled eggs
Two slices whole grain toast topped w/jam
1 cup fresh fruit
Coffee or Tea

Morning Snack:

1/3 cup raisins and nuts
1 cup skim milk

Lunch:

3-4 falafel balls stuffed into a 6" whole wheat pita
topped w/shredded lettuce, tomato, tahini dressing
Bowl of vegetable soup

Afternoon Snack:

Cut up bell peppers dipped into 2 tbsp. hummus
1 oz. string cheese
1/2 cup grape or orange juice

Dinner:

Stir fry w/ 3-4 oz. tempeh cut into strips and stir fried w/broccoli florets, mushrooms, carrots, snow peas, garlic, sesame seeds, peanut oil, lemon juice, soy sauce
1-2 cups cooked brown rice
Small green salad w/bit of dressing (optional)

Dessert:

1 cup fresh fruit sorbet
Topped w/berries (optional)

It is suggested that you see your doctor and registered dietitian before you start a new diet plan so that you are clear about how much food you need to support your dance life-- and life in general. Again, pay attention to how you feel. Nutrition is not just a numbers game. You have to feel if it is right for you. If you feel like you need to add something in, just do it. This is your life and your career! Enjoy your food, whatever it may be! Get the information and choose well to be well!

References:

1. Fritsche KL. The science of fatty acids and inflammation. *Adv Nutr.* 2015;6(3):293S-301S. Published 2015 May 15. doi:10.3945/an.114.006940

Disclaimer: The information on vegan and vegetarian diets contained in this paper is intended to help guide and inform the dancer. It is not meant to take the place of the advice of a medical professional.

This information is provided by Dance/USA Task Force on Dancer Health.

Written by: Marie Scioscia, M.S., R.D. (2020)