

Building a Balanced Vegan Meal

When you were growing up, what did a typical family dinner look like? For many of us, a “balanced meal” would include a big chunk of meat flanked by some mashed potatoes and green beans, a slice of buttered white bread on the side and a tall glass of whole milk to wash it all down. Oh, and a piece of apple pie with whipped cream on top for dessert.

These foods are woven into the fabric of American food culture. So when most folks first become vegan, they’re often unsure about how to redefine what a balanced meal should be. We totally get it. When you’re used to filling your plate with meat and dairy products, it can be tricky to figure out how to replace them. Not to mention, you’re probably fielding a lot of eyebrow raises and questions from your friends and family members. “Where do you get your protein?” “Won’t you get Osteoporosis if you don’t drink milk?”

Sound familiar?

Well, let them ask all the questions they want (and they will), because we’re happy to report that you can get all the nutrients you need to lead an active, healthy life without eating animal products or animal byproducts. You just have to know where to find these nutrients ([Chapter 11](#)) and

how to create a balanced vegan meal that keeps you full, satisfied, and, perhaps most importantly, is lick-your-plate delicious. It's definitely doable, and it's easier than you think.

But before we talk about the building blocks of a balanced vegan meal, let's take a quick look at the history of our country's dietary recommendations and how they've changed over time. And before you ask—Yes! There is a point to this.

The USDA published its first dietary recommendations all the way back in 1894. This initial guide stated that a healthy American diet should consist of protein, carbohydrates, fat, and “mineral matter” (specific vitamins and minerals hadn't even been discovered yet.) Since then, the USDA has changed its mind a bunch of times when it comes to what Americans should be eating. First, there were 12 food groups, which was eventually narrowed down to the “Basic Seven.” Next, we had the “Basic Four.” Then in 1992, we were taught that the Food Guide Pyramid was king when it came to eating a balanced diet.

Fast forward to 2011. First Lady Michelle Obama and USDA Secretary Tom Vilsack released *MyPlate* to replace the *Food Guide Pyramid* and to help Americans make healthier food choices. The new *MyPlate* guidelines emphasize the fruit, vegetable, grains, protein, and dairy groups. The sweets and fats section was eliminated all together.

As you can see, this model doesn't work for us vegans. Regardless of how often the government has changed its dietary recommendations, meat and dairy have always been the stars of the show. But don't worry! Vegans have their own set of food groups that you can combine and prepare in countless ways to create dishes that burst with flavor and variety.

The five food groups are:

- Vegetables
- Fruits
- Legumes
- Whole Grains
- Nuts and seeds

Vegetables

Without question, vegetables are a must-have in every vegan's diet. I get it; they can be scary at first. Brussels sprouts! Eggplant! Bean sprouts! The horror! But seriously, they're imperative, and prepared right they can be tasty too. You need get your greens (and reds and yellows) several times a day, every day. Many of them contain disease-preventing phytochemicals, and all of them provide essential vitamins and minerals. You can buy them fresh or frozen, depending on what's in season. Try to avoid canned veggies—they can be kind of blah.

Fruits

Fruit is low in fat, calories, and sodium, has no cholesterol, and is high in fiber. Oh, and it's delicious. What's not to love? The fiber fills you up so you feel full longer and helps keep your digestive system in working order. Fruit is also loaded with vitamins and minerals that make you glow from the inside out. Choose your favorite fresh, frozen, and dried fruits to create a balanced vegan meal:

Legumes: Beans, Peas, and Lentils

Wait, what the heck is a legume? I'm glad you asked, because legumes are one of the best ways for a vegan to pump protein into his or her diet.

Legumes are a class of vegetable that includes beans, peas and lentils. They're typically low in fat, contain no cholesterol, and are high in folate, potassium, iron, and magnesium. They're all around really good for you, and are a key part of a balanced vegan meal.

Whole Grains

We all love grains. And when you're vegan, you get to know them really well. They provide that stick-to-your-ribs feeling after every meal. That is, as long as you're eating the right kinds of grains. Whole grains are the preferred fuel for the brain, red blood cells, and nervous system. Refined grains? Not so much. These include white bread, most pastas, and white rice. They don't do much for you. Here are some of the wonderful, fiber-packed whole grains you can find at the grocery store: Brown rice, Wild rice, Whole-wheat pasta, Oatmeal, Quinoa, Millet, Amaranth, and Farro.

The Truth About Carbs

Unless you've been living under a rock for the past several decades, you've heard that carbohydrates are the enemy if you're trying to lose weight. Sure, this may be true if you're regularly wolfing down a donut for breakfast, a peanut butter and jelly sandwich on white bread for lunch and a heaping plate of pasta for dinner (please don't do this). But despite what you've heard, the right kinds of carbs are an essential part of a balanced diet – especially for vegans. Our bodies and minds need carbs for energy. So, we say screw the South Beach Diet. Here's the real truth about everyone's favorite food group.

Simple and Complex Carbohydrates

There are two types of carbohydrates: simple and complex. Simple car-

bohydrates are about as nutritious as woodchips. They're really awful for you. Foods that fall under the simple carb umbrella include most cereals, pasta, rice, bagels, breads, muffins, cookies, and the croissant you order for breakfast when you're running late for work. Simple carbohydrates are mostly made of sugar, which A) Makes you fat and B) Gives you a big sugar high followed by an even bigger crash.

Sounds pretty terrible, right?

That's because the majority of our carbohydrate intake should come from complex carbs. Sweet potatoes, brown rice, lentils, quinoa, and pasta and bread made from whole wheat are all gifts from Mother Nature that haven't been bleached, stripped, or refined by big, scary food manufacturers. Complex carbs are packed with all sorts of nutrients vegans need to create a balanced meal. You have our permission: Load up on the good stuff!

Nuts and Seeds

If you were to focus on the fat and calorie content in nuts, you'd probably be hesitant to eat them. Don't be! Adding them to your plate helps you feel full longer, which prevents you from binging on other high-calorie, high fat foods. Nuts are also a great source of protein, are high in essential amino acids and healthy fats, and have many other health benefits like vitamins, minerals, fiber, and other chemicals that may prevent cancer and heart disease.

And That Other Stuff

You may have noticed we failed to include your favorite cookies, chips, and desserts in this guide. That doesn't mean you can't have them! It just means they don't fit into any of the vegan food groups we listed above. As long as processed snack foods and desserts aren't at the center of your diet, go wild and indulge once in a while. You're only human, after all.

Who are we to deprive you of your Double Stuffed Oreos?

While we're on the topic, our recommendations for building a balanced vegan meal are not the end-all-be-all when it comes to planning a healthy diet. If you scour your kitchen cabinets in search of pecans to add to your breakfast bowl and come up short, nothing terribly bad is going to happen to you. However, if you make it a point to incorporate at least one item from each of the five food groups into most meals you make, you'll reap all the benefits of a plant-based diet without feeling hungry, sluggish, or deprived.