

About Plant-based Diets

Providing meal options to help older adults get the nutrients they need while maintaining their dietary preferences helps create a welcoming environment in your senior nutrition program. While there are many types of diets – from medically-tailored to lifestyle-focused – some diets may be more common than others within the community you serve. It’s important to be aware of this and to, as much as possible, accommodate the diets that your participants choose to follow.

Overview

One increasingly common category of diets is the plant-based or vegetarian diet. These diets are generally identified by the elimination of some or all animal products – such as meat, poultry, or seafood – and instead are built around foods that come from plants – such as fruits, vegetables, grains, legumes, nuts, and seeds. They may also include dairy, eggs, and other animal products and by-products that are not protein.

Within this category, there are several distinct types of plant-based or vegetarian diets. Although there are generally accepted definitions for each type, what an individual chooses to eat or avoid is highly personal. For example, some people may identify as vegetarian but still eat products containing gelatin, while some may identify as vegan but eat honey. People also sometimes change their dietary preferences, switching from one type of vegetarian diet to another or moving away from vegetarianism altogether.

There is no “right way” to follow a plant-based or vegetarian diet. To ensure your program is welcoming to all, respect the choices people make about their diets and focus on providing nutritious options that best fit the needs and wants of your participants.

Types of Diets

There are several common types of plant-based or vegetarian diets.

Lacto-vegetarian diets eliminate animal protein but include dairy products like milk, cheese, yogurt, and butter.

Ovo-vegetarian diets eliminate animal protein but include eggs and egg-containing foods, such as baked goods.

Lacto-ovo-vegetarian diets eliminate animal protein but include dairy and egg products.

Pescatarian diets eliminate meat and poultry but include fish and other seafood and often include dairy and eggs.

Flexitarian/Semi-vegetarian diets prioritize fruits, vegetables, legumes, and whole grains, with only occasional consumption of animal products. These diets also limit processed foods in favor of food prepared in the most natural form. Sugar and refined carbs may also be limited.

Vegan diets eliminate all animal products and by-products. This means that in addition to excluding animal proteins like the vegetarian diet, they also exclude dairy, eggs, honey, gelatin, and any other egg- or dairy-containing foods (e.g., milk, butter, whey, etc.). Veganism often extends beyond diet to all aspects of life – clothing, personal care products, entertainment, and more.

Further Reading

- [Eating Vegetarian Resources](#) (USDA)
- [MyPlate Enjoy Vegetarian Meals Tip Sheet](#) (USDA)
- [Vegetarian Diet: How To Get the Best Nutrition](#) (Mayo Clinic)
- [Plant-Based Diet](#) (Penn State Extension)