

# VITAL veganism

Getting all your body needs without animal products isn't always as simple as eating your greens. ELENA IACOVU finds out how to make your foray into plant-based eating the right way with help from health and nutrition experts.

**W**hile plant-based diets used to be the domain of the hipsters, activists and pop celebrities with personal chefs, it has quickly become apparent that veganism is more than just a fad. In fact, it should be a consideration for those looking to improve their overall health and vitality through diet. Based on a 2010 national Newpoll survey (commissioned by Sanitarium Health and Wellbeing), seven out of 10 Australians are eating more plant-based meals in the belief that eating less meat and more plant foods improves overall health. Congruous with these beliefs, studies have shown that a well-planned vegan diet can reduce the risk of cancer, cardiovascular disease, obesity, type 2 diabetes, hypertension and other chronic diseases while reducing greenhouse gas emissions and boosting longevity. But regardless of whether you are considering a vegan diet for health or for ethical reasons, the transition from omnivorous eating to the elimination of all animal products is not necessarily a smooth one. Understanding your body during this transition phase – especially your digestive system – is key to meeting daily nutritional needs and, thus, supporting your energy levels, vitality

and general health. There are challenges in knowing what to eat, and how, but they can be overcome with a little bit of nutritional know-how. According to the Australian National Health and Medical Research Council, the vegan diet has potential as both a sustainable and healthy choice for many Australians, stating that “plant-derived foods given as alternatives to animal-derived foods, such as nuts, seeds, legumes, beans and tofu, can, for all Australians, increase dietary variety and provide a valuable, affordable source of protein and other nutrients, found in meats.” Let’s see how you can do it.

## Challenges and fixes SUPPORTING DIGESTION

It is possible, in some people, that a lifetime of eating animal products has compromised their system’s ability to absorb nutrients from plant sources. To counteract this, explains integrative nutritionist and raw food health coach Scott Mathias ([scottmathiasraw.com](http://scottmathiasraw.com)), it is important to focus first and foremost on digestive functionality. “Allowing your gut and the digestive tract to first clean from the weight of the animal protein and dairy is important,” he says. “Then your body can accept the plant-based foods and begin absorbing all their nutrients.

## The plant-based transition

“How we transition is a matter of personality,” says Robyn Chuter, naturopath and nutritionist at Empower Total Health ([empowertotalhealth.com.au](http://empowertotalhealth.com.au)).

“Some people embrace dramatic change, eliminating all animal products at once – especially those coming from an ethical perspective related to the treatment of animals – but most people becoming vegan for health take the one-

at-a-time route: first they will cut out meat, then fish, eggs and lastly dairy.”

Chuter suggests that, independent of reason for going vegan, you should attempt the dramatic change. “This way the health benefits will be more immediate and impressive, which will encourage you to keep going,” she says. “However, make sure you get advice from a professional to ensure you’re meeting all your nutrient needs.”



## ***Eat well, eat variety***

**Where to get your  
vitamin needs,  
by Robyn Chuter**

**B12:** look for it in fortified foods and supplements, it's hard to get enough vitamin B12 from plant sources alone

**Vitamin D:** from exposure to sunlight – around 10 to 30 minutes each day – or take a vegan vitamin D3 supplement

**Iodine:** found in seaweeds, nori, wakame, dulse flakes – or take a vegan iodine supplement

**Omega 3 fatty acids:** found in chia seeds, flaxseeds, hempseeds and some green leafy vegetables

**Selenium:** found in brazil nuts; three a day will help you meet your needs

**Zinc:** found in pumpkin seeds, sesame seeds, sunflower seeds

**Iron:** found in pumpkin seeds, sunflower seeds, legumes.

**Calcium:** found in some Asian greens, almonds and in sesame seeds and tahini

# ONE VEGAN DAY – MEAL PLAN

by Robyn Chuter

Breakfast	Lunch	Dinner	Dessert
<p>Green smoothie made with kale, bok choy, baby spinach and high-nutrient fruits such as banana, blueberry, raspberry, kiwi, orange. Blend with a plant based milk such as hemp, oat or whole-bean soy, and add seeds such as hemp, flax or chia.</p> <p>If this doesn't satisfy your hunger, a bowl of rolled oats served as a porridge or muesli topped with some grated apple with a plant-based milk is a good alternative.</p>	<p>Have a large salad, even in winter, made with raw vegetables. Include legumes such as lentils, dried, peas or beans, either in the salad, or alternatively as a soup or as a lentil burger. People with high energy needs should add wholegrains like quinoa or rice, or a piece or two of good wholemeal and multigrain bread.</p>	<p>Small salad as entree, or raw vegetables with a dip such as hummus.</p> <p>Vegetable and legume casserole, as a stew or as a soup; or a stirfry with tofu. Include plenty of green leafy vegetables. For those with higher energy needs: add brown rice, quinoa or good-quality legume pasta to meet energy needs.</p>	<p>Have a serve of fresh or stewed fruit, or baked apples with nut cream or frozen banana.</p>

**Extra nutrition:** 30 to 40 grams of nuts or seeds per day. These can be sprinkled on a stirfry, in a salad or added to your smoothie. Include three Brazil nuts per day to cover selenium needs.

Introduce one new plant-based food a day into the diet as a meaningful solution to the absorption process.”

It's not uncommon during this phase to realise that your body is intolerant to foods such as yeast, gluten, soy, or corn, Mathias explains. “Test this by eliminating them from your diet, one at a time for a week or two, to see how your gut feels and what happens to your symptoms. Keep a food journal and record changes to digestion, sleeping patterns and mood, on a weekly basis. This will help you figure out what your body likes or doesn't like.”

### ADDRESSING DEFICIENCIES

Any restrictive diet requires planning to ensure you include everything your body needs, and veganism is no exception. Deficiencies go hand in hand with digestive functionality and absorption capacity. “You think you have deficiencies because you have eliminated meat from your diet; but it's simply pre-existing conditions of the digestive system, which have become exacerbated due to the confusion from the new plant-based foods that are entering the system,” says Mathias. Chuter concurs. “In such a case, the nutrient absorption rates will get higher over time as your body starts to adjust. There may be a period of around six months that you feel you're not getting enough nutrients; speak to your nutritionist about possible supplements

to get you through this initial stage, but most of the time it's simply a matter of allowing the digestive system to adjust.”

### NUTRIENT-DENSE EATING

Superfoods are a great way to enrich your diet because of their high density in nutrients, vitamins, minerals and antioxidants. During the transition phase, superfoods such as chia seeds, goji berries, maca and lucuma may offer many nutritional benefits, says dietitian Kara Landau (travellingdietitian.com). “What's important,” she explains. “Is not to rely solely on superfoods, but to strike a balance and incorporate foods which provide a healthy balance of fats, proteins, fibre and essential nutrients in our diet.”

In the same vein, consuming additional nutrients through smoothies and juices may make meeting your daily requirements easier. In her book, *Green Smoothie Revolution: The Radical Leap Toward Natural Health*, Victoria Boutenko explains that the main advantage of juicing over smoothies is that juice requires little digesting and can be assimilated immediately into the bloodstream, allowing the digestive system to rest. For those who suffer from severe nutritional deficiencies, and those who have a highly irritable digestive system and cannot tolerate roughage, a pulp-free juice from a cold-pressed juicer can provide valuable nourishment. For everyone else, consuming roughage can take a load off the body by

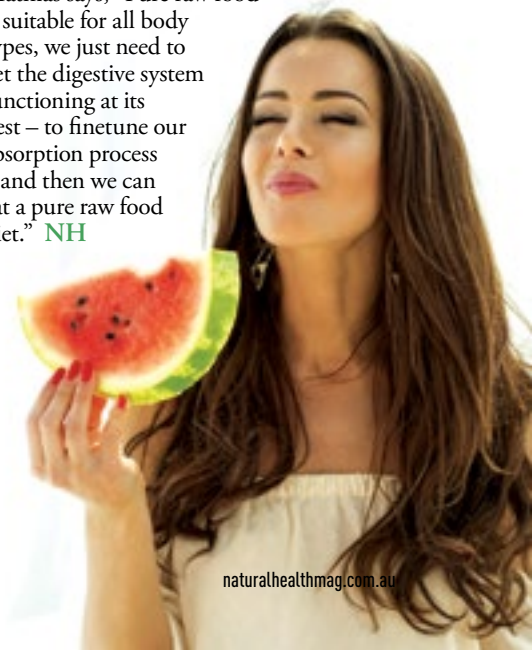
improving elimination of toxins. When these toxins have been removed, the body has a greater ability to absorb nutrients, thus improving digestion. Landau suggests, “If you're making a juice make sure you add more vegetables rather than fruits and, if you're making a smoothie, this is a great place to incorporate protein, fats, fibre and other essential nutrients instead of sugar-filled fruits and powders.”

Although it can be challenging to meet your amino acid needs with plant-based protein alone, there are sources that can help you meet your full protein needs. Recent research by the Institute of Food Technologists in Chicago concluded that algae, quinoa and pulses (legumes) are considered to be the best wholefood plant-based protein sources. If you choose to use a protein powder, Landau suggests opting for a seed-based powder such as hemp, which is rich in omega 3 fatty acid (important when you're not consuming fish or animal protein) and is also more easily absorbed and digested.

### TO RAW OR NOT TO RAW

In addition to what you eat, there is also the matter of how. The way food is prepared can have an impact on the nutrients that make it into your body. Research by Cornell University found that foods such as carrots, spinach and tomatoes when boiled or steamed supply more antioxidants to the body than they do raw. The downside being that cooking destroys their vitamin C levels. In addition, certain vegies such as broccoli are much healthier eaten raw than cooked. “During the transition phase, having partially raw and cooked foods with every meal is the healthiest option,” says Landau. “If it's all raw there can be more dietary fibre going into the system, and this can place more pressure on the body and cause digestive problems.”

But the choice to go raw, or not, is largely dependent on personal preference. Mathias says, “Pure raw food is suitable for all body types, we just need to get the digestive system functioning at its best – to finetune our absorption process – and then we can eat a pure raw food diet.” **NH**





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