

# Vegetarian Eating for Athletes

## Athlete Scenario

*I have been a vegetarian for over two years. However, my coach is concerned that I am not getting enough protein and iron. His concerns have made me question the nutrient adequacy of my diet. How can I remain a vegetarian while satisfying my nutrient needs as a competitive athlete?*

## Strategies for Athletes Following a Vegetarian Eating Style

- Meet daily needs for protein by eating a variety of plant-based protein sources.
- Include iron-rich foods in meals and snacks to facilitate oxygen transport and promote optimal exercise performance. Consume fruits and vegetables high in vitamin C with all meals to help iron absorption.
- Select foods rich in calcium and vitamin D to build strong bones and reduce risk of stress fractures (See The Sunny Side of Vitamin D fact sheet for details).
- Emphasize zinc-rich foods to ensure optimal health and performance.
- Consider non-traditional forms of vitamin B12 and calcium such as fortified foods or a supplement.
- Creatine tends to be low in the muscles of vegetarian athletes. If strength and power are key to performance, speak with a registered dietitian nutritionist (RDN) about supplementing with pure creatine monohydrate.

## Performance Foods for Vegetarian Athletes:

- Protein sources: legumes, tofu, textured vegetable and soy protein, quinoa, nuts, seeds and eggs; commercially available powders including whey, pea, and brown rice
- Iron-rich foods: legumes, soy products, nuts, seeds, whole & enriched grains, certain dark-green leafy vegetables and dried fruits
- Calcium-rich foods: dairy, certain dark-green leafy vegetables, calcium-fortified foods such as tofu, soymilk, almond milk, rice milk and orange juice; legumes, nuts and seeds
- Vitamin B12 sources: milk, yogurt, cheese, whey protein, eggs, nutritional yeast, fortified foods (soymilk, cereal, meat substitutes)
- Zinc-rich foods: legumes, soy products, nuts, seeds, and whole grains



## Tips to Take With You

1. Consume a variety of plant-based foods to help meet carbohydrate, protein, vitamin, and mineral needs.
2. Choose a wide array of protein-rich plant foods throughout the day, especially in the meal or snack following exercise to promote strength/muscle gains and to enhance recovery.
3. Vegetarian athletes may be at increased risk for iron depletion and iron deficiency. Routine assessment of iron status is recommended.

## Contact SCAN

[www.scandpg.org](http://www.scandpg.org)  
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Written by SCAN registered dietitian nutritionists (RDN) to provide nutrition guidance. The key to optimal meal planning 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](http://www.scandpg.org)