



By Rose Elliot

# Vegetarian food for babies and children *the best start in life*

SO, YOU'RE VEGETARIAN OR VEGAN, AND YOU naturally want to bring up your baby to eat the same way. I come from a vegetarian family, so this was considered completely normal. However, I know that many others aren't so lucky and are subject to all kinds of arguments and lurking fears and superstitions which make it easy to forget what study after study has shown: that a well-balanced vegan or vegetarian diet is just about the healthiest you can have, and just fine for pregnancy, babies and children. In the UK, healthy, happy, lively fifth generation vegetarian and vegan babies are now being born. So I say, make sure your

diet is as healthy as you can, then have the courage of your convictions and just do it! Don't let any of the negative people or anti-vegetarian dis-information get you down.

The Vegetarian Society publishes very helpful leaflets on how to eat healthily; I've also explained it in detail in my new *Mother, Baby and Toddler Book*, as well as in my latest book *Fast, Fresh and Fabulous*. In a nutshell, eating healthily amounts to making sure you have a good source of protein - nuts, nut butters, seeds, tahini, beans or lentils, soya products including soya milk and tofu, and dairy products or eggs if you eat these - at each meal. Have some healthy carbs - brown rice, organic rolled oats or oatmeal (lovely for breakfast), pasta, wholemeal bread or other whole grains if you're feeling adventurous - and top it all off with as much fresh fruit and veg as you like, the more the better, especially dark green leafy vegetables.

During pregnancy, your need for nutrients increases. In particular, you need more iron for the growing baby and to enable your body to make more blood; more calcium and vitamin D, for healthy bones; more protein and, in the last 3 months, more calories.

Vegetarian foods which are good sources of iron are often rich in calcium too; dark

green leafy vegetables such as kale and purple-sprouting broccoli are especially good, as are dried figs, apricots and peaches, lentils, hummus, almonds and pistachio nuts. Include them as often as you can: lentil dal with brown rice, hummus with wholemeal pitta bread, lentil soup with toast and yeast extract, compote of dried fruit with soya yogurt and chopped almonds and pistachios... there are so many things you

milk feed at a time until, by about 10 months, your baby is just having a breast-feed or bottle before bed at night.

The weaning process might go like this. Start by giving a flat teaspoonful of solid food before or after one of the breast or bottle feeds. The mid-day feed is a good one to choose to start this weaning process because this means that it will be the first milk feed to be dropped completely,

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can do once you get the idea. Do make sure you're drinking plenty of water when you're pregnant, too; your system is working overtime and needs more than usual.

When you've had your baby and you're breast-feeding, you'll need to continue to drink lots of water, and to eat as described above. You'll be amazed how hungry you are and you need to keep up your energy by having lots of little snacks - easy things you can grab with one hand while holding your baby with the other. Try a handful of nuts and raisins, a smoothie made by whizzing soya milk with a banana, some ground almonds and a dash of molasses (for iron); soothing porridge made with organic rolled oats, half soya milk and half water, topped with almonds and raisins...

Gradually you'll get your baby happily established in a feeding pattern, hopefully breastfeeding at least for a few weeks (the longer the better) or, if this isn't possible, bottle feeding (both described fully in my *Mother, Baby and Toddler Book*). After this, when your baby is 4-6 months - the longer you can leave it, the better - the next step is weaning. Many mothers are apprehensive about this - I was myself - but it's really very simple. It means gradually introducing your baby to solid food, alongside the milk feeds at first, until eventually you can drop one

making it easier for you to go back to work or out in the middle of the day. You can give fruit or vegetable purees - lightly cooked without salt or sugar and sieved, or ripe fruit finely mashed - or a rice cereal without sweeteners or other additives.

These first spoonfuls are really just to get your baby used to the taste and feel of solid food. Do not think of them as a real source of nourishment at this stage. Your baby still needs milk feeds for that, and also for the emotional satisfaction of sucking. As your baby gets used to the flavour and feel of solid food, you can gradually increase the quantity so that after a few weeks you're giving a couple of tablespoonfuls at a time.

As your baby starts to take less milk, you will need to add some concentrated sources of protein and energy to the basic fruit, vegetable or baby rice. For instance, you could stir 1/2-1 teaspoonful of flax seed or omega-balanced oil into breakfast cereal or over other foods (but don't heat it) - avocado, cheese, ground almonds, smooth almond or peanut butter, tahini and lentils cooked with oil are also excellent. I think a smooth thick lentil soup (made with olive oil, onion, orange lentils, water and no salt), makes an excellent weaning food. It's best to avoid Quorn (the manufacturers do not

## Viewpoint

Darren, Emma, Katherine and James Buckland  
Darren runs our Bulwell Info Centre, Nottinghamshire

We are an all-veggie family. Dad has been veggie for over ten years, mum for about four. Our children are 19 months and 4 in February. Neither of them has ever eaten meat, and both are thriving, happy children, having been well above the average percentile marks on the NHS progress charts.

We find variety in our diets as veggies very easy, mainly with the help of good recipe books and veggie magazines. We find people generally very accepting of our choice and they always really enjoy the delicious veggie dishes they are presented with when they come to visit.

Life as a veggie is great. It's a very uplifting, enlightening and ethically sound way to live and we love it!

recommend it for children under two) and textured vegetable protein tends to be rather salty and difficult for small children to digest. And if you're using milk, choose full-fat rather than skimmed or semi-skimmed, or soya formula milk rather than regular, until your baby is five years old.

Once your baby reaches the toddler stage (between 15 months and 4 years old) the following foods would provide an excellent daily nutritional basis:

600ml / 1 pint whole milk or soya milk formula, or equivalent in cheese or yoghurt  
25g / 1oz vitamin-enriched breakfast cereal, or the equivalent  
two thick slices wholemeal bread  
75ml / 3 fl oz orange juice or 75-100g / 3-4oz orange  
Vitamin D and, if necessary, B12 supplement.

To these you need to add, in particular, foods that are rich in iron. Children of this age can be extremely fussy, and some foods will be more readily accepted than others. Some suggestions are 1-2 daily servings of pulses (baked beans - preferably low sugar, low salt ones - and hummus are often particularly popular and are very nutritious); peanut (or other nut) butter, almonds or pumpkin seeds; a serving of potato or grain such as brown rice, millet, wholemeal pasta or wholemeal bread (in addition to the above); dried fruit, yeast extract, wheatgerm and as many raw and cooked vegetables (including a daily serving of leafy green vegetables if possible) as your child will eat. It's best to avoid sweetened drinks (give pure fruit juice diluted with water, or just water, pure and simple) and keep them away from sweets, bought biscuits, crisps

and oily, salty snacks for as long as you can.

Lively, energetic children and teenagers need a mix of carbohydrate, protein and fruit and vegetables, boosted with energy- and nutrient-rich foods. Nuts and seeds are excellent for this, as are high-quality vegetable oils such as flax seed oil, which is so valuable for its omega 3.

At this age, nuts and dried fruit make an excellent snack, as do canned or cooked beans with cooked brown rice (which they can quickly heat up); also flour tortillas which they can stuff with mashed canned beans or canned re-fried beans, maybe with chopped avocado, tomato, a swirl of oil; marinated tofu or tempeh, not to mention baked potatoes topped with grated cheese, soya cheese or hummus, or their favourite shape of pasta with tomato sauce and grated cheese. Quorn nuggets seem to be a favourite with children of all ages and of course pizza and chips! Try home-made low-fat oven-baked chips (raw potato cut into chunky chips, tossed in about a tablespoonful of rapeseed or ground nut oil and roasted on a baking sheet until golden and crisp).

There is so much delicious, healthy vegetarian food available and in feeding your child in the way I've described, you can be sure you're giving them the best possible start and laying the foundations for a lifetime of healthy eating.

If you or the baby's father, or any previous children have a history of hay fever, asthma, eczema or other allergies, it is recommended that peanuts and food containing them (including groundnut oil) are not introduced into the child's diet until the age of 3 years, and they should also be avoided in your own diet while pregnant and breastfeeding.

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