

Vegetarian kids are a growing trend

According to a recent study conducted by the Centers for Disease Control, about one in 200 kids in America claims to be a vegetarian. Many parents are unfamiliar with this diet choice and wonder how to honor their child's wish to eat a meat-free diet. Even more importantly, they wonder if a vegetarian diet is safe for kids.

Vegetarianism has grown in popularity in recent years. For some, the decision is an ethical or cultural one. For others, it's based on health benefits. Vegetarians can make modifications to suit their tastes and beliefs but generally fall into one of four categories:

- **Ovo-vegetarian:** eats eggs but no meat.
- **Lacto-ovo vegetarian:** eats dairy and egg products, but no meat.
- **Lacto-vegetarian:** eats dairy products, but no eggs or meat.
- **Vegan:** eats only food from plant sources; no eggs, dairy or meat.

In general, it is safe for kids over the age of 2 to eat a vegetarian diet as long as it's done smartly. It's important that vegetarian kids get a variety of fresh and healthful foods that are rich in vitamins and minerals and contain healthy fats. It's easy to miss out on important proteins when you remove meats and dairy products.

Beans, nuts and whole grains can be great sources of protein and are easy to incorporate into recipes.

If your child wants to try a vegetarian diet, talk to his or her doctor to find out if he thinks it's safe based on your child's medical history. Be extra vigilant about giving your child a multivitamin.

It's tempting to make your child a dish of macaroni and cheese or heavy pasta when the rest of the family is having a meat dish, but just because the dish is meat-free doesn't make it any more healthful. As a rule of thumb, limit the fat content of a vegetarian dish to less than 20 percent of the calories. Cakes, cookies and

other sweets should also be limited, as with any diet.

When it comes to preparing a dish that fits with your family's meal plan, there are simple switches you can make to suit vegetarian tastes. For example, if you're preparing beef fajitas, replace your child's beef with black beans, which give the meal a protein source and are also full of fiber. And load these meals up with fresh vegetables and fruits.

Experts from the Center for Healthy Weight and Nutrition at Nationwide Children's Hospital provided the information for this column.

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Go online for kid-friendly vegetarian recipes, including an Italian vegetable casserole and peanut butter and banana sandwiches. Yum!

