

# FEATURED BLOG

## CAN A FLEXIBLE VEGAN DIET STILL BE SUCCESSFUL?



I've noticed a big trend in nutrition lifestyles since we entered 2017, from keto (very low carbs) to vegan, and while I don't really have anything against either of these styles, I have been getting a lot of questions from my athletes on my opinion for these diets. This blog is going to be discussing my opinion, research, and information on a vegetarian/vegan diet for my athletes. I truly believe that it is a myth that you cannot hit your macros in a vegan diet, it more so depends on what your macros are and what your overall goals are (athletic performance, aesthetics and/or overall health). If you eat enough of the right calories, get enough protein, train hard, and sleep well, you can still build muscle as a vegetarian or vegan. Plant-based nutrition has long-term health benefits compared to consuming meat, yet many athletes hesitate on making the switch to a vegan diet because of inadequate information. So let's address the following questions:

*Can you build muscle from a whole food plant-based diet?*

*What foods should be consumed to gain muscle mass?*

Can muscle be gained through a plant-based diet?

In short, yes. There are four variations of vegetarianism:

- Lacto-ovo Vegetarians (dairy and eggs are permitted)
- Lacto-vegetarians (dairy is permitted)
- Ovo-vegetarians (eggs permitted)
- Vegan (no animal products permitted)

These two are technically not vegetarian, but let's still consider them part of the family:

- Pescatarians (fish is permitted)
- Flexitarians (some meat is permitted)

Each group has its own unique challenges to build muscle mass. It is important for athletes to be aware of their respective challenges, such as genetics. The main points are to consume enough calories and protein and assess any deficiencies in order to build muscle successfully. For example, it's easier to build more muscle mass from a lacto-ovo vegetarian diet than a vegan one. Egg protein offers substantial nutritional benefits (dairy, not so much). Vegan athletes can still build lean mass without question, but they will have the hardest time building size. If that's not a huge concern for you, then that's a positive.

### Calories

Vegan diets in particular tend to be low in calories for obvious reasons. To build muscle mass with vegan macros, you have to pay special attention to calorie intake. That is, you need to consume more calories than you metabolically burn during and after exercise, which we already know.

The macronutrients within your diet are the main energy providers, and the amount of energy required depends on your training plan, exercise efficiency (daily activity), gender, genetics, and non-exercise habits. If you're one of my clients, you already know this, and that's why we have your macros set up custom to each individual's needs, goals and lifestyle habits.

### Protein

Proteins are obviously very important for any vegetarian athlete and have the following functions within the body:

- Supports growth and maintenance of body tissues
- Synthesizes enzymes, hormones, and other peptides
- Maintains fluid and electrolyte balance
- Repairs exercise-associated muscle damage
- Provides energy and glucose

A solid alternative to using whey protein would be other protein powders such as pea or brown rice. Canadian Protein offers vegan protein powders at a really great rate (*shameless plug!*) I'll be honest and say they aren't the best tasting protein powders available, but what you add to these proteins can make a world of differences. Depending on your route of vegetarian diet, you could always opt for an egg white protein (also available via Canadian Protein). Arguably it is the best option, as it is more predictable than whey protein in terms of ingredients.

*"The protein in eggs has the highest biological value—a measure of how well it supports your body's protein needs—of any food, including beef. Calorie for calorie, you need less protein from eggs than you do from other sources to achieve the same muscle-building benefits." (reference: Men's Health)*

Other options include pea and hemp proteins, which are also high in proteins and easy to digest and absorb. A well-balanced, protein-rich diet is the key for building muscle mass, again, which we know. Conversely, if you are eating a lot of leafy salads, stir-fries, fresh fruit, and vegetable-based meals, you might be falling short with the macronutrients required (protein!). To build muscle on a vegan diet, you probably need to add healthy fats or proteins with every vegetable consumed during each meal.

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If you do choose to go the vegetarian or vegan diet route, these would be some awesome tips and tricks to consider:

- Eating smaller and more frequent meals throughout the day with added protein sources would help get in enough protein to hit your assigned macros.
- Adding in sources such as: beans, legumes, chick peas, tempeh, soya beans, quinoa, brown rice, and tofu can help boost the protein content of the meal.
- Add in lentils, avocados, nuts, flax seeds, and walnuts as an excellent source of free fatty acids, and avoid vegetable oils and hydrogenated and hidden trans fats.
- Natural peanut butter is also a great source of essential free fatty acids and an excellent boost to your calorie intake.
- Essential free fatty acids help with fast muscle recovery from high-intensity exercise, help with hormone production, increase metabolism, and support a healthy cardiovascular, immune, and brain function.
- Remember that it's more than just the macros that are important! Getting enough vitamins and micronutrients on a daily basis are important for overall health, performance and aesthetics as well. A healthy body is a happy body.
- We know that dairy products are high in calcium, so for the lacto-vegetarian, this is not an issue. However, vegans can consume sufficient calcium from spinach, green collard, kale, broccoli, and almonds.
- You will probably need to consume more supplements (protein powder) to get enough protein. You can only eat so much tofu, beans and tempeh. Taking these products 2-3 times a day to reach protein goals without going over on carbs and fat is highly likely. Many higher-protein plant foods are also high in carbohydrates and fat, so it can be tricky to keep those macros in the right range while still getting enough protein.

Remember that it's all about being prepared. Whether you're following a 'regular' flexible dieting approach or a vegan one, days of 'winging it' aren't always the best option. Especially with a vegan diet if you're new to the idea, it will definitely take some planning, some prep, and just more consideration as to what you're eating. That being said, as long as you're conscious of creating meals and snacks that are well balanced to your goals, it's pretty easy to reach your daily numbers. Taking time on your days off to meal plan, grocery shop and do some prep will make all the difference if you want to make this work.

If anyone is actually interested in a vegan diet, here's a rough 'sample plan' that may actually benefit you. Of course, it's going to be unique to each athlete's needs and macros, but this is probably a great place to start.

#### *Breakfast*

*Vegan protein powder, chia seeds, mixed berries, almond milk*

#### *Lunch*

*Spicy peanut vegetable salad with tofu (I have the recipe for this on my #courtsathletes access page)*

#### *Dinner*

*Lentil taco salad: lentils, onion, refried beans, lettuce, tomato, bell peppers, carrot, cilantro, avocado*

*OR*

*"Cheezy" broccoli cauliflower rice made with roasted red peppers, hemp seeds and nutritional yeast, and a serving of cajun-style vegetarian sausage*

#### *Snacks*

*Vegan protein blended with frozen fruit and stevia*

*Peanut butter and banana*

I've also heard of things like chickpea protein "cookie dough" or go to a local grocer and check out the 'meatless' options, probably found in the frozen section. Things that look/taste like meat, but are actually vegan.

I hope this brings to light some more ideas or inspiration for you, if you've been thinking about a vegan diet as an athlete. At the end of the day it comes down to 'as long as you can hit your macros', then it really doesn't matter what you eat (I say that very loosely). If you're really considering this nutrition route, please let me know and we may want to revisit your macro distribution so we can make this work a little bit easier for you.



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