Dear Alice,

My sister and I are both teenagers, and have recently become vegetarians. We were wondering how this will affect our growth and bones. Would it be better for us to eat poultry and fish, also? Thank you.

Concerned

**Answer**

Dear Concerned,

Hats off to you and your sister for recognizing that nutrition needs change in teenagers as their bodies mature, especially during puberty. The good news is that a well-planned vegetarian diet that includes key nutrients (keep reading for specifics) can be supportive of health at all stages of life and won’t inhibit growth or bone health. Beyond focusing on what you eat though, having support from friends and family can help you and your sister start this new journey on the right foot and successfully keep up with it.

Before delving into a pattern of eating that is sans animal products, it may help to better understand unique nutritional needs of teenagers. Folks experience a lot of different physical changes during the teen years: they grow taller and larger, their heart, brain, lungs, liver, and kidneys get bigger. It’s also a time when menstruation typically begins. All of these major physical changes require adequate energy, which is why getting enough necessary nutrients through food is key. Getting enough physical activity and sleep can help, too.

Generally speaking, it’s recommended that folks get most of the needed nutrients through food. Depending on the type of vegetarian diet, you can get these key nutrients a variety of ways. So, what are the key nutrients for vegetarian teens?

- **Protein** is necessary for growing teens. It is recommended for teens to consume approximately 0.5 grams of protein for every pound of body weight. To get back to your question about poultry and fish, you may find that including them in your diet is one way to meet your daily protein needs. If you’re not a fan of those options, legumes, nuts, or soy
foods can fulfill the need, too. You can also find protein in staples such as grains and vegetables — some of which are packed with protein as well!

- **Fats** such as omega-3 fatty acids support heart health. Fish and eggs are a good source for vegetarians who eat these foods; vegetable oils, chia seeds, ground flax seeds, and walnuts are some plant-based sources for those who don’t.

- **Calcium** plays an essential role in building healthy bones. In addition to calcium, weight-bearing exercise (such as dancing, soccer, weight lifting, tennis, and volleyball, just to name a few) also helps with building bone density. You may also consider avoiding too much soda and not smoking to keep your bones in tip-top shape.

- **Vitamin D** is calcium’s sidekick — the body needs it to absorb calcium, among other physiological roles. You may be able to get a two-for-one deal by looking for dairy and non-dairy products (such as soy milk) that contain calcium and are fortified with vitamin D.

- **Iron** may be more relevant to teens who have started their period or who may be prone to iron-deficiency anemia.

- **Vitamin B12** is another nutrient that some vegetarians may lack in their diet. It’s vital to your bone marrow, nervous system, and other life-sustaining functions. This nutrient can be found in foods such as mushrooms and fortified cereals.

In addition to making sure you’re getting these key nutrients, you may need to also focus on getting enough calories to meet the body’s needs. Taking in too few calories or protein during your teen years could have implications for your bone health (and health in general) later in life. If your body doesn’t have enough calories to burn for energy, it may start burning protein which limits the amount available for growth and development of strong bones and lean body mass. Learning what your daily caloric need is depends on a number of factors, so it’s worth taking some time to find out your body needs in terms of fuel.

With this knowledge, you and your sister may be ready to plan and execute your new pattern of eating. However, it’s possible that this transition could still be a challenging one if those around you have different eating habits and preferences. Surrounding yourself with people who support your new dietary choice may help you feel happier about the switch and better able to stick with it in the long run. You may also find the transition to vegetarianism a great opportunity to bond with your sister. To get others involved and potentially on-board with this change, consider teaming up with your sibling to cook meals for your family and making vegetarian substitutions into old favorite recipes. Your family may appreciate the generous gesture and be able to learn more about your new diet.

All in all, being mindful of what you eat as you develop during your teen years can set the stage for your health in the years to follow — no matter the specific eating pattern you follow. Reaching out to a health care provider or a registered dietician may help clear up any remaining questions you have about key nutrients, any need for supplementing your vegetarian diet, and any particular concerns about height or bone health.

Best wishes to you and your sister as you tackle a new way to eat and bon appétit!

Alice!
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Nutrition & Physical Activity
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Medical Services (Morningside) [10]
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