

Creating a Healthy Non-Meat (vegetarian) Meal for Early Childhood Services

The *Nutrition Checklist for Menu Planning*¹ recommends that white meat meals or non-meat meals are included on the menu **up to 4 times** per fortnight.

Well planned non-meat meals are suitable for all children, not just vegetarian children.

Follow these steps to create healthy and balanced non-meat meals that provide children with the protein and iron they need, that would otherwise be provided by meat, poultry or fish.

1. Start with a high protein vegetarian food

Examples include:

- Legumes i.e. dried or canned kidney beans, chickpeas, lentils, baked beans
- Tofu
- Eggs
- Cheese
- Milk

2. Include a fruit or vegetable high in vitamin C

Vitamin C helps the body absorb iron from the protein food.

Examples include:

- Capsicum
- Broccoli
- Cauliflower
- Bok choy
- Snow peas
- Cabbage
- Cherry tomatoes
- Green peas
- Kiwifruit
- Strawberries
- Orange/mandarin
- Rockmelon
- Paw paw

3. Include a variety of other vegetables

Add colour to the plate by adding a variety of vegetables such as:

- Carrot
- Zucchini
- Corn
- Onions
- Lettuce
- Cucumber
- Pumpkin
- Potato
- Eggplant
- Mushrooms
- Green beans
- Canned tomatoes

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Include at least two other iron containing foods

On a day that a non-meat meal is served, include at least two other iron containing foods at either morning tea, lunch or afternoon tea.

Iron containing foods include:

- Wholemeal/wholegrain bread
- Wholemeal pasta
- Breakfast cereals with added iron
- Dried fruit (apricots, dates, sultanas)
- Wholemeal flour or wheat germ in baked products (at least half the flour needs to be wholemeal)
- Legumes e.g. chickpeas, red kidney beans, butter beans, lentils, soybeans, baked beans
- English spinach, bok choy, broccoli and green peas.

Refer to the *How to include iron containing foods on the menu* tip sheet for menu ideas containing iron.

It is important to balance non-meat meals with a well-planned morning and afternoon tea to ensure enough food from each of the food groups is provided.

Healthy non-meat meal ideas:

- Vegetable lasagne
- Vegetarian pizza
- Lentil dahl with rice and yoghurt
- Vegetable and tofu pasta
- Minestrone Soup*
- Savoury Baked Beans with Pasta*
- Zucchini Slice*
- Vegetable Slice*
- Fried Rice with Tofu*
- Chickpea meatballs
- Vegetable Lentil Bolognese*
- Vegetable and tofu stir fry
- Tasty Scrambled Egg* served with toast and salad vegetables.

If there are non-meat meals on the menu that do not provide each child with a full serve of meat alternative, you must include additional meat alternatives as a side dish or as a snack at another time during the day.

Try:

- Baked beans on toast
- Egg sandwich
- Egg salad (as side dish)
- Four bean salad (as side dish)
- Hommus with vegetable sticks
- Hard boiled eggs

Refer to the *Ingredient Quantity Guide* to check if you are providing enough meat alternative.

* Recipes available in *Caring for Children: Birth to 5 years*, NSW Ministry of Health, 2014

¹ *Caring for Children: Birth to 5 years*, NSW Ministry of Health, 2014, page 92.

Adapted from 'Four steps to a healthy vegetarian meal', Healthy Eating Advisory Service, Healthy Childhood Services, Victoria.

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