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 \textbf{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**

   \textit{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.

   \textit{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

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

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