

Dear Mom/Dad, Aunt/Uncle, Grandma/Grandpa, Family Friend,  
Committed Carnivore:

Wow, your young person wants to go veganish. Congrats! They've obviously been nurtured with great values and a compassionate heart, and now they'd like to reflect that upbringing in their food choices. You must be so proud.

But I know you're also worried. You wonder if vegans and vegetarians get enough protein and iron, along with other essential vitamins and minerals. You're concerned because you've heard that an animal-free diet isn't cost effective. I'd like to allay your concerns and tell you about what a healthy, safe, and effective choice your young person is making.

First, let me tell you what the medical community has to say. When the esteemed Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics surveyed all the studies on food and health, they concluded: (1) that a vegetarian or vegan diet is as healthy as one that includes meat and, more important, that (2) "vegetarians have been reported to have lower body mass indices than non-vegetarians, as well as lower rates of death from ischemic heart disease, lower blood cholesterol levels, lower blood pressure, and lower rates of hypertension, type 2 diabetes, and prostate and colon cancer."

How's this for a nice surprise: Since veganish young people skip the cholesterol and fat that's found in animal foods and get more of that important fiber, which is absent in animal foods, they actually tend to have **better** nutrition than their peers. People who eat plant-based diets tend to eat less junk food, and their diets naturally lean toward nutrient-rich foods. Here's how a veganish young person can satisfy his/her primary nutritional needs:

**Protein:** Whole grains, vegetables, beans, nuts, and nondairy milks like almond or soy milks are all good sources of protein, as are healthy meat alternatives like tofu and tempeh, which are made with soybeans, and seitan, which is made with wheat. Worried about soy? Don't. For thousands of years, people in China and Japan lived on a diet rich with soy, and they didn't see much cancer or heart disease or obesity until the Western diet came in and changed the food landscape.

**Calcium:** Green leafy vegetables, broccoli, beans and legumes, and almonds all deliver calcium, or they can drink fortified orange juice. But I'd be careful with

juice; all the fiber is removed so it's like drinking sugary soda. Real, whole foods are best.

**Iron:** Greens and beans give them optimal amounts of iron, and vitamin-C-rich foods like citrus actually enhance the absorption of iron when consumed in the same meal.

The one crucial nutrient not in a vegan diet is vitamin B12, so it's important they take a supplement with B12 daily. It's the best and most effective weapon to guarantee that non-meat eaters get the **complete** nutritional content they need.

I want to assure you that your young person's choice to move away from animal foods is not an attack on you or your lifestyle. It's a personal choice that comes from research, investigation, and thoughtful decision-making. It doesn't mean he or she thinks you need to make that choice. They've just made the decision that feels right in **their** hearts. And it's an entirely safe and healthy diet that will reward them over time with increased energy, optimal weight, and reduced risk of obesity, diabetes, heart disease, and cancer.

I promise that communal meals don't have to be difficult. I suggest you start by providing simple substitutions. When it's taco night, offer your non-meat eater black bean or lentil fillings instead. Both are cheap and easy to make and will honor your child's wishes without much effort on your part. Meat alternatives like veggie burgers, sausages, meatless crumbles, and meatballs are easy to find in your grocery store's frozen food aisle, and actually are much less expensive than animal meat. Don't you generally have a salad and/or a vegetarian side dish or two at family meals already? A collection of healthy side dishes is a perfectly fine way for a veganish eater to make a complete meal if you skip the butter and cheese. Making staples like beans and some kind of cooked whole grain (brown rice, millet, quinoa, buckwheat; or you can buy a big bag of mixed grains and cook them all together) available as a nonvegan alternative to a meal is a cheap and nutritious way to respect your child's wishes without having to become a short-order cook. Or why not give your young person the ingredients and tools to make those staples for themselves? Try cooking some meat-free dishes together! This book has some terrific and simple recipes that were specifically designed for young people to make for themselves, or with their family and friends. If you're game to experiment with more vegan food, perhaps

*consider adopting Meatless Monday in your household. You'll be amazed by the abundance of delicious, healthy, nutritious and affordable options that everyone in the household will like and look forward to.*

*Thank you for supporting your dear young person and helping them lean into a veganish diet. And don't worry: They will get their protein, calcium, and iron!*

*Love and good health,  
Kathy Freston*