variety of nutritious foods that are less processed. When parents try to force their children to eat meat, the children often eat worse than they did before!

**Nutritional needs are high** during the years between 13 and 19. Make sure your child is eating a variety of foods, including fruits, vegetables, plenty of leafy greens, whole grain products, nuts, seeds, and legumes. A multi-vitamin with 100% of the U.S. RDAs may be a good idea for all teens, vegetarian or not.

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**Help! My Teen Is a Vegetarian!**

When you have a question, call or visit your local office of The University of Georgia’s Cooperative Extension Service.

You’ll find a friendly, well-trained staff ready to help you with information, advice, and free publications covering agriculture and natural resources, family and consumer sciences, 4-H and youth development.

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**REvised by Don Bower.**

Extension Human Development Specialist,
from publications originally prepared by
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Gale A. Buchanan, Dean & Director

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The University of Georgia Cooperative Extension Service

College of Family and Consumer Sciences
and College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences cooperating
Children take control of many things for the first time in their teen years. That includes their eating habits. For some kids, this means becoming a vegetarian. Suddenly, your teen may lecture you on animal rights, or live on chips and dip and refuse to eat the roast at dinner.

You may be at your wit’s end, but being vegetarian can actually be a very healthy choice! Some teens may try it just for a while, but others may be vegetarian for the rest of their lives.

As with any diet, there are healthy and unhealthy vegetarian choices. Your input can help your child make the right ones.

**What is a vegetarian?**

A vegetarian is someone who does not eat meat, fish, or poultry. The guideline for some is “anything with a face.” They may drink or eat milk, cheese, and eggs.

A **strict vegetarian** is someone who does not eat meat, dairy products, eggs, or animal byproducts such as gelatin. A “vegan” may take this a step further and use no animal-related materials such as wool and leather. A few people may avoid only red meat.

**What are the benefits of a vegetarian diet?**

There are ethical, environmental, and health reasons to become a vegetarian. Some teens may believe in animal rights. Others may want to protect the environment. Raising animals uses huge amounts of plant food, water, and land. Teens may also worry about hormones, disease, and cholesterol.

**What should my teenager eat in order to get the right nutrients?**

- **Protein** – It’s very easy to eat enough protein on a vegetarian diet. Milk, cheese, beans, breads, cereals, nuts, peanut butter, and tofu are all good sources.

- **Calcium** – Calcium is very important for building bones during adolescence. Make sure your child gets enough from dairy products, green leafy vegetables such as broccoli, collard greens, and kale (not spinach, beets, rhubarb, or chard greens), and fortified soy milk and tofu or calcium-enriched orange juice.

- **Iron** – Teenagers, especially girls, need plenty of iron. Vegetables, fruits, grains, legumes, nuts, fortified cereals, enriched bread, pasta, and rice all provide iron. The iron will be absorbed better if you combine these with foods rich in vitamin C, such as orange juice or tomatoes.

- **Vitamin D** – Milk and fortified soy milk are good sources of vitamin D. Sunlight will help the body make enough vitamin D. However, in winter, sunlight in gloomier climates may not be enough. A vitamin mineral supplement containing 100% of the Daily Value is also a good option.

- **Vitamin B-12** – B-12 isn’t available in plant foods, so dairy products, fortified cereals, fortified soymilk, nutritional yeast, and multivitamins are the best sources of vitamin B-12 for vegetarians. Do not take more than 100% of the RDA of vitamin B-12 a day. Do not depend on spirulina, sea vegetables, tempeh, or miso for B-12. Their B-12 is mostly inactive.

- **Zinc** – Legumes, nuts, and zinc-fortified cereals, soy foods, sesame and sunflower seeds, and whole grains are good sources of zinc.

**Special issues for teenagers:**

Many teenagers become vegetarians in order to lose weight. But changing a meat-containing diet will also allow weight loss. If your teen’s diet has lots of sweet or fatty foods, replace them with fruits, vegetables, grains, and legumes. Also watch portion sizes. If they already eat healthy food, more exercise, such as walking, running, or swimming daily, can help control weight.

Teenagers may choose vegetarianism to show their independence or to fit in with their friends. This is fine as long as they eat a wide