

## How Athletes Can Make the Most of a Plant-Based Diet

Different [diet trends](#) gain popularity from year to year. In recent years, the move to plant-based sports nutrition has been on the rise as more elite and professional athletes have made the switch to vegan and [vegetarian](#) diets. Although a plant-based diet doesn't necessarily mean your athlete will enhance their performance, it will enhance their health.

According to the Alternative Healthy Eating Index developed by [Harvard University researchers](#), individuals who decide to move from an omnivorous to plant-based diet typically improve their [overall nutrition](#) because they consume more fruits, vegetables, beans, and whole grains that provide high levels of vitamins, minerals, and fiber, while also being very low in saturated fat and devoid of cholesterol.

If your adolescent athlete is looking to experiment with their nutrition to achieve a competitive edge, improve their overall health, or follow a more [ethical, eco-friendly diet](#), here are ways they can make the most out of a plant-based diet.

### Get educated on what their body needs to function at its best

According to the [TrueSport Nutrition Guide](#), "athletes have increased energy needs, which allows for more opportunities to obtain the nutrients they need through a balanced diet composed of a variety of natural foods."

Active young athletes on a plant-based diet must focus on what specific plant-based foods will get them the nutrients they need to sustain their energy in order to enhance their athletic performance, decrease fatigue throughout the day, and

**Table 11:** MICRONUTRIENT SOURCES

Selected Micronutrients	B Vitamins	Calcium	Vitamin C	Vitamin D	Magnesium	Selenium	Iron
Vegetables	Leafy green vegetables Asparagus Cauliflower Sweet potatoes Mushrooms	Broccoli Kale Turnip greens	Tomatoes Potatoes Broccoli Red peppers Turnip greens Collard greens		Spinach Romaine Lettuce	Green beans Broccoli	Spinach
Fruits	Dried prunes Bananas Orange juice	Fortified Orange juice	Citrus fruits like oranges grapefruit and strawberries		Pineapple Banana	Banana	Raisins and dried apricots
Grains	Whole grain breads cereals pasta rice tortillas	Corn tortilla Flour tortilla	Fortified breakfast cereals	Fortified cereal	Whole grain cereals and oatmeal	Spaghetti Rice	Oatmeal Spaghetti Fortified cereals
Dairy	Milk Yogurt	Milk and dairy products		Milk and dairy products	Yogurt	Cottage cheese Cheddar cheese	
Meats eggs nuts and beans	Turkey, pork chicken salmon tuna soy	Soybeans	Tofu salmon	Tuna salmon sardines soy milk eggs	Almonds cashews peanuts baked beans chick peas	Lean beef ham chicken tuna nuts	Red meat dark meat poultry chick peas shrimp

prevent injury.

Table 11, found in the [TrueSport Nutrition Guide](#), lists sources of micronutrients that may be low in an athlete's diet. The table includes a variety of plant-based foods that an athlete can incorporate into their diet to ensure that they're getting the proper servings of nutrients they need.

### **Know their sources of key nutrients**

Plant-based nutrition has been proven to [boost health](#) by preventing obesity, type 2 diabetes, hypertension, cancer, and heart disease. Do you know where your athlete can get the best nutrients to keep their body functioning and performing at its highest level on a plant-based diet?

The [TrueSport Nutrition Guide](#) suggests young athletes incorporate nutrients from:

#### **Protein**

- Cooked black beans
- Cooked lentils
- Cooked quinoa
- Cottage cheese
- Cheese
- Eggs
- Milk (nonfat or low-fat)
- Tofu and other soy products
- Yogurt (nonfat or low-fat)

#### **Carbohydrates**

- Fruits: raisins, bananas, berries, oranges, etc.
- Fruit juices
- Granola bars
- Oatmeal
- Baked white or sweet potato (plain)
- Bagel
- Whole wheat bread
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#### **Fats**

- Nuts (mixed)
- Seeds
- Nut butters

- Olive oil
- Avocado

### **Combat convenience foods by meal planning**

Whether it's for a typical school day, an [intense day](#) of training, or a full day of competition, one of the most significant ways to help your athlete thrive on a plant-based diet is by encouraging them to develop the healthy habit of meal planning.

Set aside time with your athlete to plan a [weekly menu for meals and snacks](#) that they can take with them for the day, which will help them avoid the [temptation to eat convenience foods](#) that aren't as healthy as those [prepared at home](#).

### **Try different methods of food preparation**

A [study](#) found that while many school children did not like cooked vegetables, home prepared vegetables were preferred to those received in school. It also reported that the texture of the product was another important factor that influenced the consumption of fruits and vegetables.

The study results determined that the “positive aspects of texture that were mentioned were crispy, crunchy, and juicy which contributed to children's preference for fresh, raw fruit and vegetables.”

From fresh, crisp salads to grilled vegetables, there are many ways to prepare a [vegetarian meal](#) that will keep your athlete asking for more. Get in the kitchen with your athlete to experiment with the different ways of preparing their meals. Try different cooking methods like roasting, which brings out the natural sweetness in the food. Using a variety of seasoning blends, sauces, and flavored oils also helps to jazz up boring foods like chicken and vegetables.

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Whether your adolescent athlete is committed to a plant-based diet or not, it's vital to their overall health to reinforce the importance of fueling their body with nutrient-dense, [whole foods](#).