Vegan weaning

During weaning, iron-fortified infant rice cereal is a great option as the first food due to its high source of iron. The cereal can be mixed with expressed breast milk or soya formula to keep a thin consistency. A variety of foods are to be encouraged when weaning including vegetables, potatoes, cereal foods, pulses (peas, beans and lentils), tofu, ground nuts, seeds and fruits. As long as baby doesn't have an allergy, nuts can be given from six months but make sure they are finely ground. Children under five years old should not have whole nuts because of the risk of choking and inhalation. Naturally sweet fruits (such as apples or bananas) or vegetables (such as carrots, sweet potatoes or butternut squash) can be used to sweeten foods rather than adding sugar. Never add artificial sweeteners to foods for infants.

Eating for energy

Vegan diets tend to be less energy dense and children need to eat large quantities to get enough energy. We know that children typically have small appetites so achieving their daily calorie needs can be a challenge. Adding healthy oils to food, such as soya bean or rapeseed are key, as they add more calories to meals and encourage the production of fatty acids needed for brain development.

Protein

Protein is a key nutrient for growth and development and is essential in every child’s diet. There are plenty of protein-rich foods suitable for a vegan diet and these include a variety of pulses, beans and lentils which will ensure a mix of amino acids. Grains such as quinoa, nuts and nut butters are good sources of protein to include, provided your child has no allergies. Egg replacers are available in health foods shops and some supermarkets, and can be used in cooking and baking. Aim to include three portions of vegetable protein per day to ensure adequate nutrition.

Calcium and milk alternatives

Cherry yogurt

We all know calcium is key for healthy bones and approximately 45 per cent of our bone mass is accrued before the age of 8 years. A further 45 per cent is laid in the next eight years with the remaining 10 per cent in the following 10 years. It's therefore essential calcium requirements are met for children on a vegan diet.

Soya milk that’s fortified with calcium and vitamin D are an important choice, and include soya yogurts and calcium-rich cereals too. Oat and coconut milks are another option – they’re both fortified with calcium but not vitamin D. Rice milk can be used as a main drink for children from the age of five.

Spreads such as Pure, Vitalite or Suma can be used. Almonds, tofu, beans and green leafy vegetables are also good sources of calcium and should be regularly included in a child’s diet. It’s important that parents check the calcium recommendations for their child as they vary with age.

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| **Age Group** | **Age (years)** | **Calcium (mg) per day** |
| **Infant** | Under 1 | 525 |
| **Children** | 1-3  4-6  7-10 | 350  450  550 |
| **Adolescents** | 11-18 | 800 (females) 1000 (males) |

Iron

Iron is essential for the formation of red blood cells. Good sources of iron that should regularly be included in the diet are a mixture of pulses including beans, lentils and peas, dark green leafy vegetables such as broccoli, okra, watercress or spring greens, wholemeal bread and flour, nuts, wholegrains and fortified cereals. Dried fruits such as apricots, prunes and figs are also good choices.

Vitamin D

Required for absorption of calcium and strong bones and teeth, vitamin D is made in the skin. Dietary sources for vegans are limited so fortified soya milk is the best option to use. It may also be necessary to start a vitamin D supplement. The dose will depend on the child’s age.

Vitamin B12

Essential for the formation of red blood cells, vitamin B12 is key for brain and nervous system formation. It’s widely recognised that vitamin B12 is only found naturally in animal sources, so those following a vegan diet may need a supplement. Fortified breakfast cereals and some low salt yeast extracts contain B12, as do plant milks and soya products. It’s important that a combination is included in your child’s diet. If not, a B12 supplement may be required.

Fibre

High fibre foods tend to be very filling and can often cause children to become full before they've got all of the calories they need. Avocados, nuts and dried fruits are great energy-dense foods to include that contain fibre. Remember it’s good practice to encourage children to brush their teeth after eating dried fruits to minimise the chance of tooth decay.

In summary, vegan diets can be safe for children once parents are well informed about the key nutrients required for growth and development. However, parents must be extra cautious to ensure they're following a balanced diet.