

# WHAT WE'RE READING...



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*NOTE: Some sentiments contained within "What We're Reading" articles may not strictly conform with Simple Again's nutritional outlook. We read articles containing opposing information all the time and derive our nutritional philosophies from the latest science, the opinions of experts worldwide and our anecdotal experiences in the field. We keep an open mind and a strong affinity for fact-based evidence to help make the world of nutrition "Simple Again" for you.*

## The Vegan Triathlete

Triathletes are naturally concerned about nutrition — for workouts and recovery and on race day. There can be different nutritional strategies for different athletes, and some lifestyle choices significantly affect our triathlon nutrition. Perhaps the biggest is the vegan lifestyle. Can the vegan triathlete be successful in our sport? Absolutely, but some planning is required.

First, some definitions. A vegan diet excludes all animal products, including meat, poultry, fish, eggs, milk and dairy products. The simple rule is nothing with a face or a mother. Vegans get all their protein and macronutrient needs from plant-based sources. Vegetarians don't eat meat but generally consume dairy products. There are lacto-ovo-vegetarians (eggs and dairy products), lacto-vegetarians (dairy but no eggs) and ovo-vegetarians (eggs but no dairy). Typically veganism is considered a lifestyle, while vegetarianism is more of a diet.[i]

Here are a few considerations for the vegan triathlete or indeed any vegan endurance athlete.

### Protein

Not eating meat, a question vegans often get asked is "How do you get enough protein?" It's actually quite easy, since there are plenty of high-quality, plant-based proteins. Foods include legumes, beans, peas, lentils, dark leafy green vegetables, nuts and seeds, whole grains like quinoa and millet, wild rice, and sprouted grain breads (like Ezekiel 4:9 breads).

There are a couple of protein issues to keep in mind. First, proteins from plant sources are harder to digest and absorb than animal proteins.[ii] Vegans should eat more protein than non-vegans. If you're following a protein range in your diet (for example, 0.4 to 0.8 grams protein per pound of body weight), increase it by 10 percent to allow for the incomplete absorption of plant proteins. [iii] Eat small amounts of protein during the day to ensure protein is available when your body needs it.

### Amino Acids

Proteins are made up of amino acids. There are 21 amino acids, with the body making 11 of these. The other nine amino acids, called essential amino acids, we must get from food. Animal protein contains all nine essential amino acids (so are called "complete proteins"), but few plant foods do, with the exception of soy products and quinoa.[iv]

But a mix of plant proteins can provide all nine amino acids in the combination. For example, beans and corn combine to form a complete protein, as do sprouted grain bread and peanut butter. These combinations don't have to be eaten at the same time, but should be consumed in the same day. [v]

### B12

The vitamin B12 is found only in meat, so vegans typically need to make a special effort to obtain it. B12 is an essential vitamin important to triathletes, since it assists in the production of red blood cells.[vi] Vegans can either take a B12 supplement, or eat cereals or soy milk fortified with it. Try to obtain about 10 micrograms per day.[vii]



## Calcium

Vegans can find good sources of calcium and vitamin D in kale, bok choy, spinach, rhubarb, broccoli and calcium fortified tofu, non-dairy milk, orange juice and cereals. Calcium is essential for bone health, and failing to get enough in the diet may be the reason vegans have a higher incidence of fractures than their meat-eating compatriots. [viii]

## Omega-3 Essential Fats

Since vegans don't eat fish, they may be lacking in the omega-3 fats, which are important for heart health and in controlling inflammation. Omega-3s can be obtained from walnuts, flaxseed and chia seeds. Chia seeds are a vegan's best friend, since they contain the most omega-3 of any plant-based source, along with protein, vitamins, minerals and antioxidants. [ix]

## Performance and the Vegan Triathlete

Let's ask the big question: does a vegan diet support performance in endurance events? Absolutely! David C. Nieman, professor of health and exercise science at Appalachian State University, notes "we know that when it comes to endurance performance, it's all about the fuel, primarily carbohydrates, and you can get sufficient carbohydrates whether you're a vegetarian or a meat eater".[x]

Monique Ryan, MS, RDN, and IRONMAN U nutrition expert assures endurance athletes that a vegetarian or vegan diet can fuel workouts and provide what's necessary for recovery. IRONMAN athletes need a lot of carbohydrates for the high levels of training necessary, and a plant-based diet provides those carbs.[xi]

## Resources

So what if you're a triathlete considering a vegan lifestyle or are a vegan mulling over the triathlon lifestyle? First, consider consulting a registered dietitian who is knowledgeable of the vegan lifestyle and athletic needs. You can find dietitians through the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics at [eatright.org](http://eatright.org). One such expert well known to the triathlon community is Monique Ryan, author of "Sports Nutrition for Endurance Athletes" (a classic that should be in everyone's training library).

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