

# Plant Power for Teens (13-18 years) Ngā Taiohi Whēkana

Your teen years are a time of growth, energy and change. A well-planned plant-based diet can give you the nutrients you need to stay strong, active and focused. This might be the first time you're exploring nutrition or thinking about going vegan and that's awesome. Whether you're curious, ready to commit or figuring out how to talk with your whānau about it, this guide is here for you.



## Thinking About Going Vegan? Nau mai ki te haerenga whēkana!

People go vegan for all sorts of reasons; like helping the planet, reducing animal harm or feeling better in their body. When well-planned, vegan diets can support your growth, sports performance and overall health. But it's also normal to face challenges (wero): maybe your parents aren't on board, food costs are tight or perhaps it feels isolating.

You're not alone. Some teens find support in online vegan communities – just be sure they're respectful and moderated. Food choices are also shaped by what's available, how we feel about our bodies and what we see online. Many foods are designed to be super tasty and aggressively marketed, especially to young people. Learning how these marketing tricks work can help you feel more in control without needing to label foods as 'bad'.

And if you're seeing perfect bodies or filtered faces online – it's not always real. Following people who promote positive, realistic messages around food and body image can make a big difference.

### Here are tips for spotting positive and reliable voices:



- Shares balanced, evidence-based information that matches this resource.
- Has nutrition or health qualifications and is open about them.
- Encourages variety, flexibility and progress – not perfection.



- Promises quick fixes or overnight results.
- Uses fear-based language ("Never eat this!") or shames food choices.
- Sells products as 'magic' solutions without credible evidence.

*Tip: Unfollow any accounts that make you feel bad about your body or eating habits. The best pages help you feel inspired, not pressured. Kimihia ngā whārangi a-ipurangi e tuku atu ana i ngā whakaaro pai.*

### Talking with Your Whānau

Not all families will understand or support going vegan right away, and that's okay. Here are a few ways to make the conversation easier:

#### \* Start with your 'why' – Tō Take

Let them know why this is important to you. Whether it's the environment, animal welfare, your health, or just wanting to try something new.

#### \* Reassure them – Whakamanawatia te whānau

Parents often worry you won't get enough nutrients. Show them you've done your homework and are planning balanced meals.

#### \* Offer to help – Āwhinatia

Ask if you can help cook a few meals, plan the shopping list or prepare your own lunches.

#### \* Be flexible – Kia ngāwari

If your whole whānau isn't vegan, you can still share meals and focus on adding plant-based options to what's already on the table.

#### \* Be patient – Ngaki-tatari

Change takes time. It's okay to take small steps, explain things more than once and keep the conversation open.



**Remember:** your food journey is yours! Being respectful of your whānau's views helps build understanding and support over time.

# Building a Balanced Teen Plate

**Vegetables** Ngā huawhenua  
At least 3 servings  
veg a day

**Fluids**  
Ngā Momo Inu  
5+ cups a day

**Fruit**  
Ngā huarākau  
2 servings of fruit a day

**Grains and Starchy Veg (6+ servings/day):** whole grains like brown rice, oats, wholemeal bread and starchy veg like kūmara and potatoes give lasting energy.

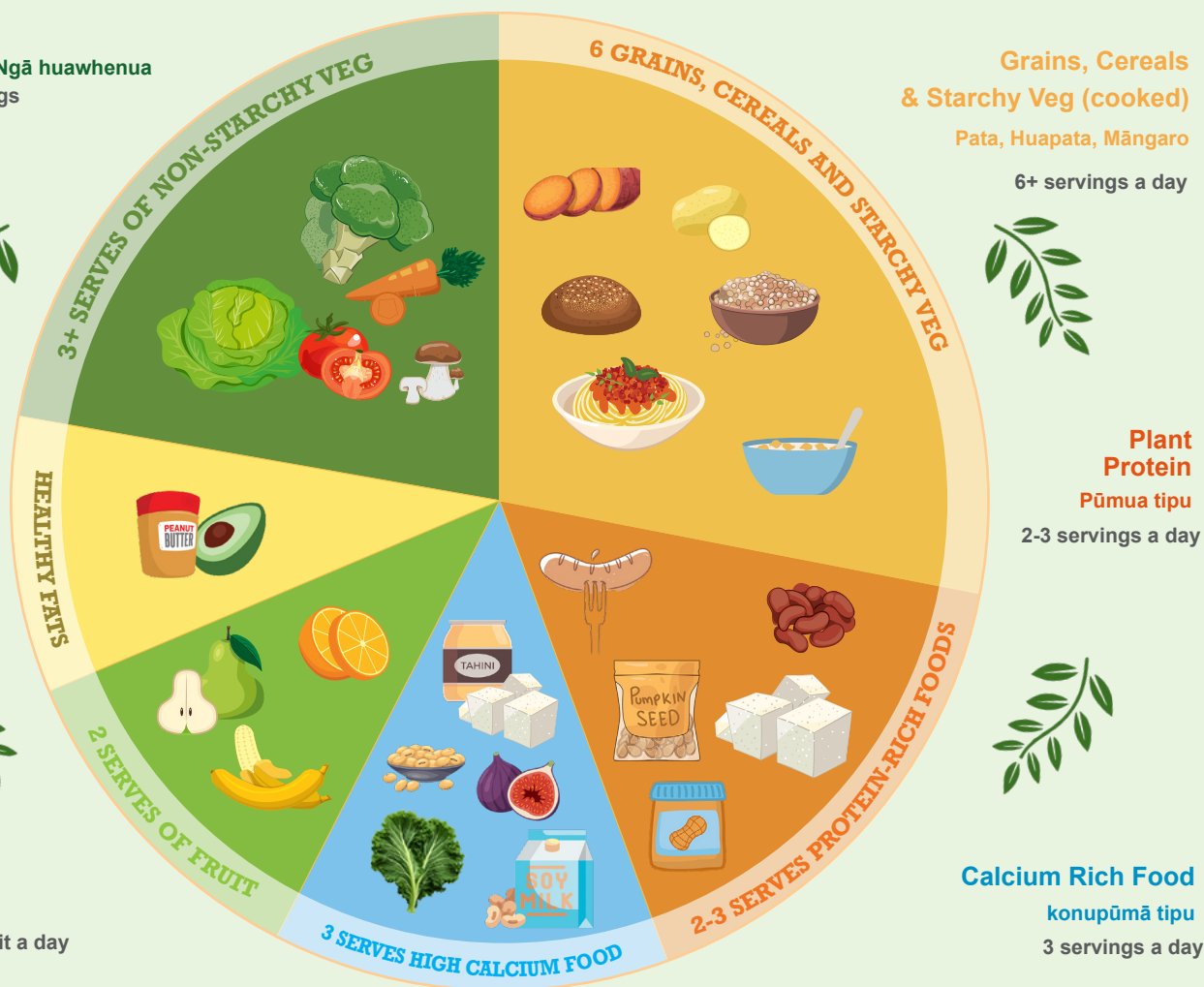
**Protein Foods (2–3 servings/day):** beans, lentils, tofu, tempeh, soy milk, peanut butter, nuts, seeds and hummus help build muscle and support immunity.

**Vegetables (3+ servings/day):** the more colour, the better – eat a rainbow daily to get vitamins, minerals and fibre.

**Fruits (2 servings/day):** fresh, frozen or canned in juice – great for vitamin C and antioxidants.

**Calcium-rich Foods (3 servings/day):** choose calcium-fortified plant milks, tofu, leafy greens, tahini and almonds.

**Healthy Fats (a variety every day):** include avocado, chia/flax seeds, nuts and olive oil to support brain and hormones.



## Sample Day on a Plate

**Breakfast/Parakuihi:** overnight oats with soy milk, banana, chia seeds and berries.

**Snack/Paramanawa:** apple slices with peanut butter.

**Lunch/Kai a te Rānui:** wholemeal wrap with hummus, falafel, salad veg and tahini drizzle.

**Snack/Paramanawa:** popcorn + smoothie with soy milk, mango and spinach.

**Dinner/Kai a te Pō:** tofu stir-fry with brown rice and mixed veggies.

**Supper (if needed):** coconut yogurt with chopped nuts and fruit.





# Key nutrients for teenagers

## Protein

Protein is essential for building and maintaining muscles, supporting growth and repairing body tissue. It is especially important for active teens going through rapid physical changes. Protein also helps maintain a strong immune system. Plant-based protein sources like lentils, beans, tofu, tempeh, soy milk, quinoa and nuts/seeds are excellent, versatile options that can be included in everyday meals or as quick 'run and go' snacks.

## Iron

Iron plays a crucial role in making haemoglobin; the part of red blood cells that carries oxygen around your body. It supports energy, concentration and overall vitality. Teenage girls need extra iron due to blood loss during menstruation. Good plant sources include lentils, tofu, leafy greens, and iron-fortified cereals (Breakfast cereals with added iron to boost intake. Check the label for "iron" in the ingredients!) To enhance absorption, pair iron-rich foods with vitamin C sources like oranges, kiwifruit, or capsicum.

## Omega-3 Fats

Omega-3 fats – especially ALA (alpha-linolenic acid) – support brain development, focus and mood regulation. They're also anti-inflammatory and help protect your heart. Plant sources include chia seeds, flax seeds, walnuts and hemp seeds. If these aren't eaten regularly, consider a supplement made from algal oil (a vegan source of DHA and EPA).

## Vitamin D

Vitamin D helps your body absorb calcium effectively and also supports your immune system. It's mostly made when your skin is exposed to sunlight. Aim for 10–15 minutes of safe sun exposure each day (depending on skin tone and location), especially during summer. In winter, or if sun exposure is limited, a vitamin D supplement may be needed.

## Calcium

Your teen years are a once-in-a-lifetime window to build strong bones, as over 90% of bone mass is developed by early adulthood. Calcium is the key mineral for this, helping prevent bone issues later in life. When on a plant-based diet include calcium-fortified products where calcium has been added to the food (like some plant milks) to help meet daily needs. This can include tofu made using calcium salts (look for calcium sulphate on the ingredients list) which increases the calcium content. Include leafy greens, tahini and almonds to reach your daily calcium needs.

## Iodine

Iodine is crucial for healthy thyroid function, which regulates your metabolism and energy levels. On a plant-based diet, the best way to ensure enough iodine is to use iodised salt in cooking, or to include seaweed occasionally (like nori or wakame).

## Zinc

Zinc helps keep your immune system strong, supports skin health (especially helpful during acne-prone years) and aids in wound healing. Teens need more zinc than younger children and plant-based sources include wholegrains, beans, tofu, nuts and seeds. Soaking or sprouting these foods can help with absorption.

## Vitamin B12

Vitamin B12 is essential for making red blood cells and keeping your brain and nerves healthy. Because it is no longer naturally found in plant foods vegans must get B12 from either fortified foods (like soy milk, cereals and nutritional yeast) or a supplement. A daily supplement of 50–100 micrograms (µg) of cyanocobalamin is highly recommended due to serious risk associated with deficiency. Teens should get a blood test every 1–2 years to check B12 and iron levels and to ensure their current approach is working. Consult your healthcare provider to ensure the right dosage for optimal health.

## Lifestyle essentials

Healthy habits go beyond food!

These lifestyle tips help support energy, focus and overall well-being during your busy teen years.



### Physical Activity

Whakapakari Tinana

Aim for at least 60 minutes of activity each day. It could be sports, biking, dancing, skating or just a walk with friends – whatever gets you moving and feeling good!



### Drink plenty of water

Inumia te Wai Māori

Water is your best drink. It keeps you focused, energised and hydrated. Aim for 6-8 cups a day and go easy on fizzy drinks, juice and energy drinks, which are high in sugar.



### Prioritise sleep

Kia Tau Te Moe

Teens need 8-10 hours of sleep a night to support growth, learning and mental health. Try to stick to a regular sleep routine and take a break from screens before bed.



### Support your mood

Hangaia te Taha Hinengaro

Food, sleep and movement all impact how you feel. Balanced meals, regular activity and downtime to relax can help manage stress and boost your mental wellbeing.

# Heard this before? Myth Busting



## **You can't get enough protein without meat.**

Not true (Hē)! Lentils, tofu, beans, nuts and soy milk can give you all the protein you need. Especially when you eat a mix of them.

## **Vegan food is always healthy.**

Nope (Hē)! Just like any diet, vegan eating can be balanced or not. Chips and soft drink are vegan, but don't give your body the nutrients it needs to grow.

## **You need dairy for strong bones.**

No (Hē); you need calcium for strong bones. Plant foods like tofu, fortified soy milk, leafy greens and tahini give you calcium. Ensure you are getting enough Vitamin D too, as it's essential for calcium absorption.

## **Only meat has iron.**

Beans, lentils, leafy greens and cereals can be rich in iron. Pair them with vitamin C foods (like fruit or capsicum) for better absorption.



## **Final Messages**

Eating plant-based as a teen can be empowering. With a bit of planning and variety you can meet your needs, feel great and support causes you care about. Remember, it's about progress not perfection. Try to eat mostly nourishing foods, be curious about new meals and ask for support when you need it. Talking to a school nurse, GP or dietitian can help you feel confident in your choices. You might also like the Vegan Society's 21 Day Challenge – a supportive, moderated space where you can get recipes, tips and encouragement from experienced vegans! Karawhiua!

## **Other Considerations**

### **Learn More (References) on these trusted websites:**

NutritionFacts.org: [nutritionfacts.org](https://nutritionfacts.org)

The Vegan Society: [vegansociety.org.nz](https://vegansociety.org.nz)

NZ Ministry of Health Guidelines: [health.govt.nz](https://health.govt.nz)



**Want help?** Talk to a school nurse, dietitian, or doctor.

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Guidelines used -

<https://www.health.govt.nz/system/files/2012-08/food-nutrition-guidelines-healthy-children-young-people-background-paper-feb15-v2.pdf>

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*Disclaimer: The information in this brochure is for educational purposes only. While we have tried to make sure it is accurate and up to date, we cannot guarantee that it will always apply to your individual circumstances. If you have specific dietary concerns or medical conditions always seek medical advice from your doctor or health professional.*

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