

# Vegan Nutrition

## TAIORANGA WHĒKANA

### FOR PLANT-POWERED TAMARIKI NOHINOHI 1-3 YEARS



#### Taioranga Whēkana for tamariki nohinohi 1-3 years

Creating a balanced, nutritious diet for vegan toddlers is essential for their growth, development and long-term health. Feeding your toddler can be a joyful experience as they explore new tastes and textures. Providing your toddler a good variety of legumes, grains, nuts, fruits and vegetables should meet most of their nutrient needs. In this guide we cover key nutrients, foods, recommended supplements and tips for feeding vegan toddlers.

#### Energy Requirements

Toddlers are full of energy and growing quickly, so meeting their energy needs is essential. Plant-based diets are high in fibre but may be lower in calories, which can make them feel full before they get enough energy. To boost energy intake, add healthy fats to meals (like olive oil, avocado, or nut butter) and offer nutritious snacks between meals.

#### Nutrients

Providing your toddler a good variety of legumes, grains, nuts, fruits and vegetables should meet most of their nutrient needs.

Let's consider some of the key nutrients that need special consideration.



#### Protein

Protein is essential for your toddlers' growth, immune health, and overall well-being. Great plant-based sources include beans, lentils, chickpeas, tofu, tempeh, soy milk and nut butters. Aim to include a high-protein option with each meal to meet their needs.

#### Vitamin B12

Vitamin B12 is crucial for growth, brain and nerve health, and red blood cell production. Vitamin B12 is not naturally found in plant foods. Although some foods are fortified with vitamin B12 these may not reliably meet your toddler's requirement. Therefore, it's recommended that plant-based toddlers take a B12 supplement. Consult your healthcare provider to ensure the right dosage for optimal health.

#### Calcium

Ensuring adequate calcium intake is essential for your toddler's bone health, teeth development and growth.

[Key sources of calcium >>](#)

Calcium fortified soy milk is an excellent choice as it is also a good source of protein. Look for options that provide 120mg of calcium per 100 ml.

Alternatively other plant-based milks fortified with calcium can be used (although these provide minimal protein).

Tofu made with calcium sulfate is a great source of calcium. Other sources to boost your toddler's calcium intake are soy yoghurt, fortified breakfast cereals (check the label), leafy

greens (such as kale and bok choy) and chia seeds.

Ensure that your toddler gets enough vitamin D, as it is needed for calcium absorption.

#### Vitamin D

Vitamin D supports bone health, immunity, and growth, but it's limited in plant-based diets. Sunlight helps produce vitamin D, so outdoor play is beneficial – just remember sun safety. If sunlight exposure is limited, and during winter, a vitamin D supplement may be necessary. Those in the southern regions of NZ should be prescribed vitamin D from their health provider.

#### Iron and Zinc

Iron and zinc are essential for toddlers' brain development, blood health, immunity and growth. A vegan diet can meet these needs with foods like lentils, beans, tofu and fortified cereals.

A great way to increase iron intake is to add iron-fortified cereals to baking. Dark green leafy vegetables and raisins are also good sources of iron, while nuts and pumpkin seeds offer valuable amounts of zinc. Pairing these foods with vitamin C sources (e.g. oranges, capsicum, kiwifruit, berries) helps boost absorption.

Since calcium can inhibit iron absorption, serve alternative milks between meals. If a child shows signs of low energy or paleness, consult a GP for iron level checks and advice regarding supplementation.

# ESSENTIAL nutrients

## Iodine

Iodine is essential for brain development, physical growth and thyroid function. A deficiency can result in low IQ, stunted growth and learning difficulties. As our New Zealand soils are low in iodine, locally grown produce is an unreliable source.

Two slices of commercial bread and ¼ tsp (1.5g) of iodized salt are sufficient to meet the daily iodine requirements while small amounts of seaweed e.g. nori also provide iodine. (Tip: rock salt and pink Himalayan salt are usually not fortified with iodine.)

If you are still breastfeeding your toddler, you should continue iodine supplementation provided by your health professional.

## Healthy Fat

Fats are essential for brain development and as a source of energy, so include these in meals and snacks. Good sources are avocados, nut butters, tahini and plant-based oils like olive and coconut oil.

Omega-3 fatty acids are essential fats crucial for children's brain and eye development. These include ALA (alpha-linolenic acid) which is found in plant-based foods, EPA (eicosapentaenoic acid) and DHA (docosahexaenoic acid) found in fish and algae. A small percentage of ALA can be converted into EPA and DHA in the body.

Ground flaxseeds, flax oil, chia seeds, hemp seeds and walnuts are rich sources of ALA. These can be added to cereals, smoothies or used in baking. Include a source of omega-3 daily. Algal oil supplements may also be considered for additional DHA and EPA.

## Vitamin A

Vitamin A is crucial for growth, eye health, and immune function. While plant foods do not contain pre-formed vitamin A, they provide beta-carotene, which the body converts into active vitamin A. However, this conversion can be inefficient for some people, which may place vegan children at risk of vitamin A deficiency. Ensuring a diet rich in beta-carotene sources, like carrots, kūmara, kale and spinach is important. Eating these foods with a small amount of fat, such as olive oil, can help enhance beta-carotene absorption.

### Feeding Challenges

Feeding a fussy toddler can be challenging as they begin to assert their independence and become pickier with food. To encourage healthy eating habits, keep mealtimes relaxed and positive. Offer a variety of foods without pressuring them. Most toddlers enjoy finger foods. Try lentil patties, par-cooked baby carrots, broccoli florets, toast fingers or crackers with nut butter.

Involving them in cooking or giving choices between options can help them feel in control and more open to trying new foods. Serving small portions and setting a good example by enjoying healthy foods yourself can foster a positive attitude toward eating. With patience and flexibility, you'll support their development of healthy eating habits.

If your toddler's picky eating impacts their nutrition, consult a dietitian to check if they're getting a balanced diet and to offer support for feeding challenges.

## GENERAL TIPS FOR VEGAN TODDLER NUTRITION AND HEALTH



### Focus on Whole Foods

Foods prepared at home from whole foods and fresh produce are preferable to processed foods.



### Regularly Offer Variety

Serve a wide range of foods to ensure they get a spectrum of nutrients and to help them develop a diverse palate.



### Cut your toddler's food into smaller bite-sized pieces to prevent choking.

Foods such as whole nuts, whole grapes, cherry tomatoes, popcorn and pieces of frozen fruit are best avoided.



### Hydration

Make sure your toddler drinks enough water, especially if consuming high-fibre foods.



### Curb their sweet tooth!

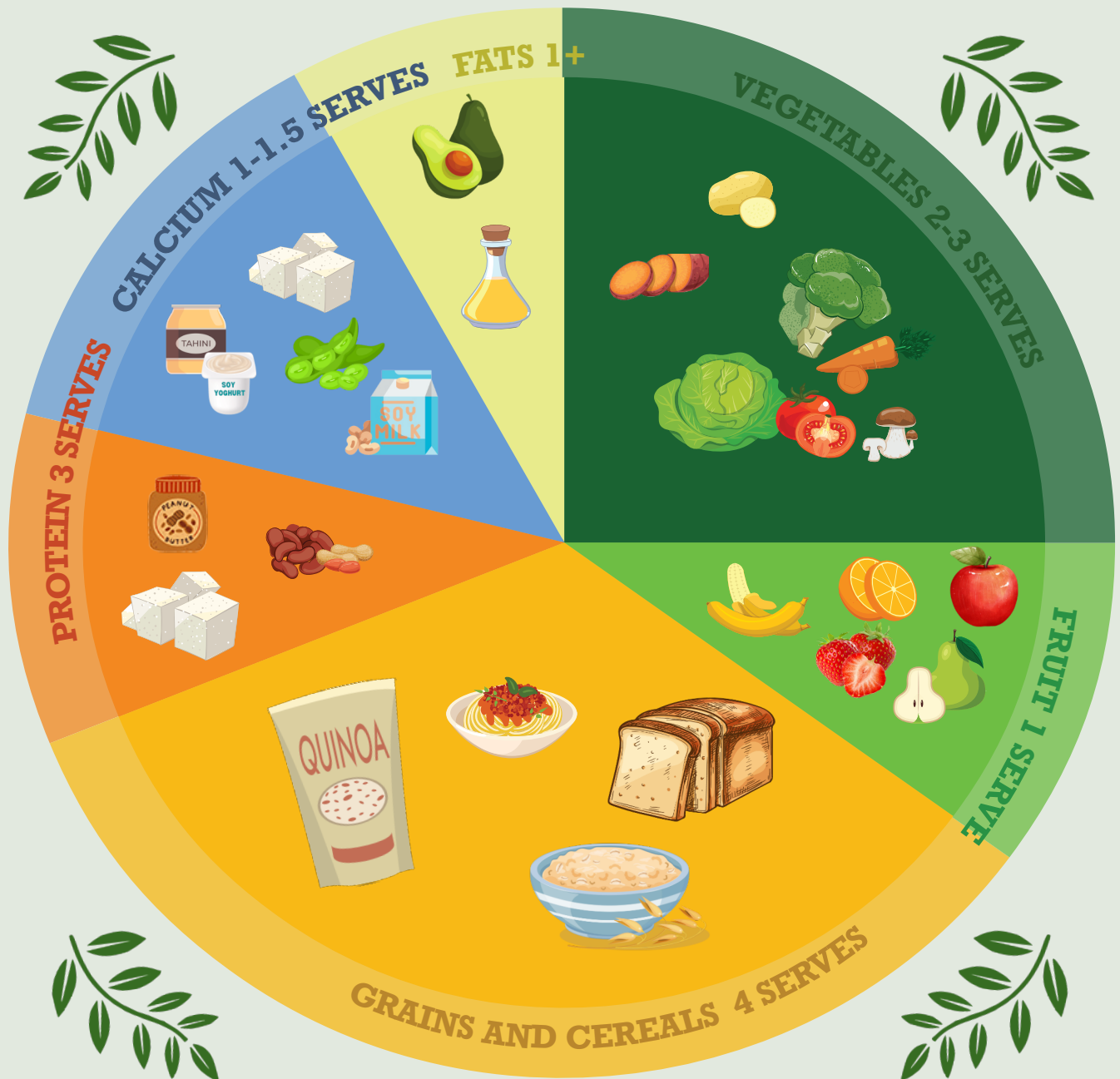
Limit intake of sugar, lollies and soft drinks.



### Height and Weight checks.

It is important to maintain regular height and weight checks with your health provider so that any concerns are caught early. They can help ensure your toddler is meeting their developmental needs and staying healthy on a vegan diet.

# A balanced plate



## A Balanced Plate

Ministry of Health [daily nutrition recommendations](#):

**Vegetables - Ngā huawhenua** 2-3 serves; 1 serve = 75g, eg: ½ cup mixed veg; leafy greens, broccoli, capsicum, carrot, pumpkin.

**Fruit - Ngā huarākau** 1serve; 1 serve = 150g, eg: 1 med apple, 1 med pear, 1 small banana, 1 cup berries, 1 orange.

*(Divided into smaller serves 2-3 times a day)*

**Grain foods - witi me te pata** 4 serves; eg: 1 serve = 1 slice wholegrain bread, ½ cup cooked oats, ½ cup brown rice or quinoa.

**Protein - Pūmua tipu** 3 serves; eg: 1 serve = ⅓ cup cooked beans/lentils, 60g tofu or 1Tbs peanut butter, 1 vegan sausage

**High calcium foods - konupūmā tipu** 1-1½ serves; eg: 1 serve = 1 cup/250ml of fortified plant-based milk.

*(Divided into smaller serves 2-3 times a day)*

**Health fats - hinu hauora** include 1+ serve = 7-10g; eg 1serve = 1/4 avocado or 1-2 tsp olive oil.

## Supplements

A well-balanced vegan diet can meet your toddler's needs for protein, most vitamins, and minerals. If there are concerns about dietary adequacy, consult a vegan-friendly dietitian. While a multivitamin may help in some cases, individual supplements should only be taken under professional guidance, and supplements should not replace a nutritious diet.

# Some meal suggestions

## SAMPLE MENU (SUMMER)



### Parakuihi (Breakfast)

Green smoothie with fortified plant milk, ground oats, spinach, banana, and ground flaxseeds. Toast fingers with spread.

### Paramanawa (Snack)

Apple slices with nut butter.

### Kai a te rānui (Lunch)

Club sandwiches with hummus, avocado & tomato. Ice pole made with soy yoghurt and berries.

### Paramanawa (Snack)

Home-made carrot and ground walnut muffin.

### Kai a te pō (Dinner)

Quinoa, chickpea and veggie salad with extra virgin olive oil and lemon dressing.

### Before Bed

½ cup fortified milk + crackers.

**TIP: remember to add ¼ tsp iodised salt and healthy fats to meals.**

## SAMPLE MENU (WINTER)



### Parakuihi (Breakfast)

Oatmeal made with fortified soy milk, topped with chia seeds and kiwifruit.

### Paramanawa (Snack)

1 slice wholemeal toast with almond butter.

### Kai a te rānui (Lunch)

Lentil and vegetable soup with 1 slice wholemeal bread + vegan butter. Orange slices.

### Paramanawa (Snack)

Custard made with fortified soy milk and stewed apple.

### Kai a te pō (Dinner)

Tofu stir-fry with mixed veggies (capsicum and carrots) and noodles.

### Before Bed

Hot chocolate (cocoa with fortified plant milk). Digestive biscuit if hungry.

## Conclusion - bringing it all together

Nurturing vegan children can be a rewarding experience. By offering a variety of plant-based foods and enjoying meals together, you're fostering healthy eating habits and helping them explore different flavors.

With some planning and a positive approach, you can confidently support their well-being and instill a love for nutritious, plant-based foods.

### Disclaimer:

This information is for general educational purposes and not a substitute for professional medical or nutritional advice. Individual needs vary, so consult a qualified healthcare provider or dietitian for personalised guidance and before making major dietary changes. *References: contact the NZ Vegan Society for a full list of references and additional recommended reading.*



## VEGAN NUTRITION FOR TODDLERS

Written by Emelia Ruddell (Human Nutrition Undergraduate) and Sandra van Lill (Accredited Practising Dietitian)The Vegan Society of Aotearoa would like to thank the contributors and the many individuals and groups who gave feedback as part of the consultation process that helped shape this flyer; Doctors For Nutrition, Jennifer Douglas NZRD – Jumpstart Nutrition, Dr. Amanda Benham PhD, APD, FASLM – PB Nutrition. Translation by Emelia Ruddell and Isla Reeves-Martin

This resource follows The New Zealand Ministry of Health Healthy Eating Guidelines for New Zealand Babies and Toddlers 2021. Code:HE2903.

Published 2025, next review 2028

*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.*