

Vitamin B12: What Vegetarians & Vegans Need to Know

WHAT IS VITAMIN B12?

Vitamin B12, also known as cobalamin, is made by bacteria. Animals eat food containing these bacteria, and then the animals become sources of vitamin B12.

WHY DO YOU NEED VITAMIN B12?

- To form and maintain healthy red blood cells
- To form and maintain healthy nerve cells
- To make DNA, the genetic material in cells

WHAT HAPPENS IF YOU DON'T GET ENOUGH VITAMIN B12?

- Pernicious Anemia – a type of anemia characterized by large red blood cells. Symptoms include fatigue, breathlessness, listlessness, and poor resistance to infection.
- Nerve damage. Symptoms may include numbness and tingling in the hands and feet.
- In infants: delayed growth and development, movement disorders, anemia
- Other problems: constipation, loss of appetite, weight loss, depression, confusion, difficulty keeping balance, dementia, poor memory

Most deficiencies can occur because of a problem absorbing B12 in the intestine, though strict vegans (who consume no animal products) can also develop deficiencies over an extended period of time. Since the body stores some B12, it can take years for vegans to develop a deficiency.

WHAT FOODS ARE GOOD SOURCES OF VITAMIN B12?

Animal products, especially fish and seafood, are good sources of B12. Foods such as unsweetened yogurt, and eggs can provide B12 for lacto-ovo vegetarians. Vegans can get B12 from fortified foods, nutritional yeast, and dietary supplements. Fortified foods are made with the B12-producing bacteria, not animal products.

It was once thought that tempeh, miso, and sea vegetables could provide B12. However, these foods do not contain the active forms of the vitamin. Instead, they contain inactive forms, which may actually interfere with B12 absorption and metabolism.

References

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