

Vitamin B12 on a Plant-Based Diet: 10 Must Knows

1. Vitamin B12 is an essential nutrient that everybody needs. It is important that people on plant-based diets are aware of how to obtain it as it is not reliably found in plant foods.
2. Not getting enough vitamin B12 can have serious health consequences including nerve damage (which can cause paralysis, blindness, etc.), mental health problems, gastrointestinal problems, memory loss, and many other health issues. Simply avoiding deficiency is not enough, as having suboptimal levels of B12 can increase the risk of sudden death from cardiovascular disease.
3. A deficiency of vitamin B12 in infants can result in developmental delay, growth failure, intellectual disability, seizures and death. For this reason, it is vital for pregnant and lactating women to ensure they have an adequate daily intake of vitamin B12 and it is recommended that infants are supplemented directly by age 4-6 months.
4. Blood tests are available to test for vitamin B12 deficiency, but they are not 100% reliable and irreversible damage to your health could have occurred by the time a deficiency is detected. Prevention of deficiency is a far better option than waiting for a deficiency to occur.
5. ALL people on plant-based diets need to supplement with vitamin B12 and it is also often recommended that everyone over 50 years of age supplement too, as the ability to absorb B12 from food decreases with age. Some people on certain medications (e.g. Metformin) or with certain health problems (such as gut issues and autoimmune disorders) may also need to supplement (or have regular injections) to avoid deficiency.
6. Vitamin B12 is stored in the liver, but it is NOT correct to assume that stores from prior intake will last for years or even months. It is best to start supplementing when adopting a plant-based diet.
7. Some foods are fortified with vitamin B12, but the amounts added are low and it is safer and cheaper to take a vitamin supplement in tablet, lozenge or liquid form. Spirulina, mushrooms, chlorella, seaweed, unwashed vegetables, etc. are NOT reliable forms of vitamin B12.
8. There are several forms of vitamin B12. The recommended form for most people to supplement with is cyanocobalamin, as it is the most stable and is readily converted to the two active forms that our bodies use. The active forms are not as stable and supplementing with only one of these (such as methylcobalamin or adenosylcobalamin alone) may not be adequate. People who smoke or have kidney disease should take the hydroxocobalamin form of B12.
<https://www.nature.com/articles/ejcn2014165.pdf>
9. It is generally best to take vitamin B12 as a single nutrient supplement rather than rely on any multivitamin or prenatal. This is because other nutrients in those supplements can convert vitamin B12 into inactive analogue forms. The minimum recommended dose of vitamin B12 to supplement for adults is 50mcg of cyanocobalamin per day and 100-250 mcg per day is the frequently recommended dose for adults under 50, and 500-1000 mcg per day for people over 50. Another option is to take 1000mcg at least twice per week. It is recommended that infants being weaned onto a vegan diet be supplemented with vitamin B12 from 4-6 months of age (5 mcg daily) and daily throughout childhood (25-50 mcg).
10. Risking B12 deficiency by not supplementing appropriately is extremely unwise. It could not only ruin your own health but can also damage the reputation of plant-based diets. Having a healthy plant-based eating pattern is one of the best steps you can take for not only your own health, but for the earth and all its inhabitants. Everyone on plant-based diets should supplement B12.

For more information, a comprehensive review of vitamin B12 can be found at: <http://www.mdpi.com/2072-6643/8/12/767>

The information here is of general nature and is not intended to replace individualised dietary advice from an Accredited Practising Dietitian.
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