

Following a Flexitarian Diet

What are the benefits of a flexitarian diet? And how does soy fit into it?

What is a Flexitarian Diet?

“Flexitarian” combines two words: **flexible** and **vegetarian**. This eating style is plant-forward, meaning it focuses on plant foods, but it’s flexible.

On a flexitarian diet, you don’t have to give any foods up! You can enjoy **a mix of protein foods** such as soy foods, beans, lentils, nuts, seeds, eggs, meat, seafood, poultry, and dairy.

Flexible Vegetarian



Over the past few years, there has been an increase in people trying the flexitarian diet, driven by the interest in plant-based foods and products for nutritional benefits.¹

If you’re looking to add more plant-based foods to your everyday eating pattern, the flexitarian diet is a simple solution that’s easily adaptable to individual preferences.

Nutritional Benefits

A flexitarian diet is one way to follow a healthy eating pattern.

A healthy eating pattern focuses on eating a variety of plant foods such as vegetables, fruits, whole grains, unsaturated oils (like olive, soybean, and sunflower oil), nuts, seeds, beans, and legumes (like soy foods such as tofu, soy milk, and edamame) as well as lean animal proteins and fat-free or low-fat dairy.²



A healthy eating pattern may support weight management goals.² It may also help reduce the risk of heart disease,³ type 2 diabetes,⁴ and certain types of cancer, including breast cancer.⁵

1. International Food Information Council. Food and Health Surveys 2019-2022. <https://foodinsight.org/2022-food-and-health-survey/>
2. U.S. Department of Agriculture and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2020-2025. 9th Edition. December 2020. Available at [DietaryGuidelines.gov](https://www.dietaryguidelines.gov)
3. Shan Z, Li Y, Baden MY, et al. Association Between Healthy Eating Patterns and Risk of Cardiovascular Disease. *JAMA Intern Med.* 2020;180(8):1090–1100. doi:10.1001/jamainternmed.2020.2176
4. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. On Your Way to Preventing Type 2 Diabetes. <https://www.cdc.gov/diabetes/prevent-type-2/guide-prevent-type-2-diabetes.html>
5. Shin S, Fu J, Shin WK, Huang D, Min S, Kang D. Association of food groups and dietary pattern with breast cancer risk: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Clin Nutr.* 2023 Mar;42(3):282-297. doi: 10.1016/j.clnu.2023.01.003. Epub 2023 Jan 12. PMID: 36731160.

Why Soy?

As a heart-healthy, plant-based protein option, soy is a natural fit for a flexitarian diet.



Soy protein and soybean oil have been recognized by the FDA as heart-healthy options.^{6,7} Isoflavones found in soy may also support heart health.⁸



Soy is a complete protein. It provides all of the nine essential amino acids, in the amounts our bodies need.⁹



Protein plays an important role in weight management because it provides a greater feeling of physical fullness when eaten, compared to carbohydrates and fat.¹⁰ Edamame, tofu and tempeh are all examples of soy foods that contain protein.



Population studies suggest a link between soy intake and lower risk of breast cancer. Soy foods are uniquely rich sources of isoflavones which are naturally occurring compounds in plants. Isoflavones may be protective against breast cancer.^{5,11}

Easy Meal Ideas for a Flexitarian Diet

These recipes offer a flexible mix of plant foods and protein options including soy foods, meats, seafood, and dairy. They're also flexible enough to customize to your liking. Try swapping in your favorite proteins, fruits, veggies, grains, and more.



Grain bowls topped with tempeh or tofu and a mix of your favorite vegetables

Try this:
Tempeh Nourish Bowl with Lemon Miso Dressing



Fajitas or tacos made with beans, tofu or tempeh and your favorite toppings

Try this:
Veggie and Tofu Fajitas

Pasta with your favorite meat or seafood, edamame, and veggies

Try this:
Easy Shrimp and Veggie Pasta Fresca



Chili with a blend of texturized soy protein and ground turkey or beef

Try this:
Soy Turkey Chili Recipe



6. U.S. Food and Drug Administration. "Soybean Oil and Reduced Risk of Coronary Heart Disease." <https://www.fda.gov/media/106649/download>. July 31, 2017.
7. U.S. Food and Drug Administration. "Health Claims: Soy Protein and Risk of Coronary Heart Disease." <https://www.accessdata.fda.gov/scripts/cdrh/cfdocs/cfcfr/CFRSearch.cfm?fr=101.82>. April 1, 2018.
8. Ma L, Liu G, Ding M, Zong G, Hu FB, Willett WC, Rimm EB, Manson JE, Sun Q. Isoflavone Intake and the Risk of Coronary Heart Disease in US Men and Women: Results From 3 Prospective Cohort Studies. *Circulation*. 2020 Apr 7;141(14):1127-1137. doi: 10.1161/CIRCULATIONAHA.119.041306. Epub 2020 Mar 23. PMID: 32200662; PMCID: PMC7138725.
9. Hughes GJ, Ryan DJ, Mukherjee R, Schasteen CS. "Protein Digestibility-Corrected Amino Acid Scores (PDCAAS) for Soy Protein Isolates and Concentrate: Criteria for Evaluation." *Journal of Agriculture and Food Chemistry*. 2011 December 14;59(23):12707-12. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/22017752>.
10. Wardlaw, G.M. & Hampl, J.S. (2007). *Perspectives in Nutrition*, 7th edition. McGraw Hill
11. Fan Y, Wang M, Li Z, Jiang H, Shi J, Shi X, Liu S, Zhao J, Kong L, Zhang W, et al. Intake of soy, soy isoflavones and soy protein and risk of cancer incidence and mortality. *Frontiers in nutrition* 2022;9:847421.