Nutrition Guide for Vegan Children Under 5 Years of Age

The Vegan Society
One world. Many lives. Our choice.

A varied and well-planned vegan diet, with appropriate supplementation, can meet our nutritional needs at all stages of life, including during infancy and early childhood.

This position is supported by several health organisations, including the British Dietetic Association (BDA 2021), the Canadian Paediatric Society (Amit et al. 2010) and the Società Scientifica di Nutrizione Vegetariana (the Scientific Society for Vegetarian Nutrition) in Italy (Agnoli et al. 2017).

Although the NHS has not published a formal position statement on vegan diets for infants and children, it does not advise against them (NHS 2022a). Instead, NHS guidance emphasises the importance of ensuring that vegan infants and children eat a wide range of foods to provide enough energy and nutrients for healthy growth and development.

Vegan infants: the first 6 months of life

Breastfeeding

Breastmilk provides all the nutrients a baby needs for the first 6 months of life, including beneficial compounds that support growth and the development of the immune system. As such, the World Health Organization (WHO), the NHS and the UK's Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition recommend exclusive breastfeeding for the first 6 months of life and continued breastfeeding alongside complementary foods up to 2 years of age or beyond because this may offer health benefits for both breastfeeding woman and child (World Health Organization 2023; Office for Health Improvements & Disparities 2025).

All exclusively breastfed infants, whether following a vegan diet or not, are recommended to receive a daily supplement containing 8.5–10 micrograms (µg) of vitamin D (NHS 2020).

For further information, see The Vegan Society Vegan Breastfeeding resource here.

Vegan infant formula

There are many reasons why a parent may not be able to, or may choose not to, breastfeed their infant. All feeding choices deserve respect and support.

For infants who are not breastfed, UK public health recommendations state that infant formula must be used as the main milk drink for the first year of life (NHS Best Start in Life n.d.).

Availability of vegan infant formula in the UK

No vegan infant formula is currently approved for use in the UK.

Abbott's product Arize (Abbott 2022) is the only plant-based formula available in the UK. It is classified as vegetarian, not vegan, and is regulated as a food for special medical purposes. This means it should only be used for infants with a specific clinical need (e.g. a cows' milk protein allergy) and always under medical supervision.

Some vegan-labelled formulas are sold overseas; however, because these do not meet UK regulatory standards, they are not recommended for use in the UK (First Steps Nutrition Trust 2024.).

Soya-based infant formula

Although infant formulas based on soya are not automatically vegan-friendly, they are a close alternative that some vegan parents may prefer to use. However, soya-based infant formula is not currently available in the UK and UK guidance (NHS 2023) generally advises against using soya-based formula for infants under 6 months of age or as the main milk drink from 6 to 11 months unless recommended by a healthcare professional. This caution relates to:

- concerns around naturally occurring phytoestrogens
- added carbohydrate sources, such as maltodextrin, corn syrup or sugars

Importantly, there is no evidence from studies in humans that shows harmful hormonal effects in infants fed soya-based formula and research indicates that it supports normal growth in full-term infants (Vandenplas et al. 2014). The current recommendations are therefore precautionary.

Note, however, that soya formula is not suitable for pre-term infants (Zuppa et al. 2015) or for infants with congenital hypothyroidism (Conrad et al. 2004). Parents of pre-term infants should seek guidance about their feeding options from a paediatric dietitian.

Hydrolysed rice protein formula

These formulas should only be used under medical supervision, as per regulations (First Steps Nutrition Trust 2025; Saad et al. 2025). In the UK, the only available product is Abbott's Arize (Abbott 2022). As mentioned previously, this is a vegetarian formula classified as a food for special medical purposes and must be used under medical supervision for infants with a clinical need (e.g. cows' milk protein allergy), in line with EU Regulations (Abbott 2022).

Rice drinks

Unmodified rice drinks must not be given to infants or children under 5 years of age due to concerns about their arsenic content (NHS 2022b).

Supporting vegan families

The lack of an approved vegan infant formula in the UK places vegan families in a challenging and sometimes distressing position. It is our hope that we can provide some comfort in reminding families that veganism is defined as a way of living that seeks to exclude, as far as is possible and practicable, all forms of exploitation and cruelty to animals.

First foods: 6 months and beyond

In the UK, babies are recommended to start complementary feeding – solid foods offered alongside continued breastmilk or appropriate infant formula – from around 6 months of age (World Health Organization 2026) when showing the three clear signs of developmental readiness for safe eating as set out on the NHS website (NHS 2026).

If you feel your baby may need solids before 6 months, speak with a qualified healthcare professional first.

There are two main ways to introduce solids, which can be used alone or in combination (British Nutrition Foundation 2026a):

- Spoon-feeding: offering smooth purées of fruits, vegetables, and iron- and protein-rich foods from around 6 months of age following your baby's cues. Textures can progress to mashed or chopped foods and soft finger

foods between 6 and 9 months, followed by firmer foods between 9 and 12 months (BDA 2020).
- Baby-led weaning: offering appropriately soft, graspable finger foods from around 6 months of age and allowing your baby to self-feed. This approach may support independence and the development of fine motor skills (Gomez et al. 2020; Children's Hospital of Orange County 2025).

General feeding guidance

- Always ensure your baby is sitting upright, is safely supported and is supervised during meals.
- Let your baby go at their own pace. It can take as many as eight or ten exposures for them to accept new foods.
- As solids gradually increase, their intake of breastmilk or formula will naturally decrease.

Nutrition from 6 to 12 months

Vitamins A, C and D

UK guidance recommends that all children aged 6 months to 5 years who drink less than 500 mL of infant formula per day should receive a supplement containing vitamins A, C and D. Formula-fed infants do not need additional vitamins unless they drink less than 500 mL daily because these vitamins are already added to infant formula (NHS 2024).

A suitable option for vegan infants is The Vegan Society's VEG 1 Baby and Toddler Liquid Multivitamin, which provides vitamins A, C and D.

Throughout their first year, breastmilk or an appropriate infant formula should remain the main source of nutrition, providing most of the energy, protein, fat and micronutrients needed.

However, a few nutrients need extra attention in vegan diets.

Iron

Iron needs increase to 7.8 mg per day from 7 to 12 months (British Nutrition Foundation 2021.). Include iron-rich plant foods such as:

- legumes (lentils, beans and chickpeas)
- tofu* and tempeh*

- wholegrains*
- ground nuts* and seeds*
- iron-fortified breakfast cereals (ensure no or low amounts of added sugars or sweeteners)

Pair these with vitamin C-rich foods (e.g. fruits and vegetables) to support the absorption of iron.

Zinc

Zinc needs increase to 5 mg per day from around 7 months (British Nutrition Foundation 2021.). Good plant-based sources include:

- legumes
- wholegrains*
- ground nuts* and seeds*

Zinc (like iron) is better absorbed when calcium-fortified foods are not offered at the same meal, so, where practical, consider separating these foods (Li et al. 2025).

Routine zinc supplementation is not recommended for healthy, full-term infants unless advised. Pre-term infants may require supplementation based on clinical guidance (Embleton et al., 2022.).

* *Safety and allergen note:*

Foods such as ground nuts, seeds (including nut/seed butters), soya and wheat should be introduced from around 6 months, alongside other foods, but should be:

- initially offered in very small amounts
- introduced one at a time

Watch for any signs of allergy, although once introduced and tolerated, allergenic foods should be offered regularly as part of a balanced diet (Allergy UK 2025)

Avoid whole nuts and seeds due to the risk of choking. Spread thinly, mix into foods or use nut/seed butters; do not offer in large spoonfuls.

If your child has a diagnosed allergy or a strong family history of allergy (e.g. asthma, eczema, hay fever), seek advice from a healthcare professional before introducing peanuts.

Vitamin B12

Vitamin B12 is essential for brain and nervous system development (Levent et al. 2024) and, in vegan diets, must be provided through fortified foods or supplements.

For children aged 7–12 months, the UK recommended intake is 0.4 µg per day (British Nutrition Foundation 2021.). Vitamin B12 supplements usually contain higher amounts because only a small proportion can be absorbed at any one time (Norris n.d.).

Although there is no clear agreement on the ideal supplement dose for vegan infants, based on the available evidence, a daily supplement providing around 5 µg of vitamin B12 may be considered for exclusively breastfed babies (Norris n.d.). However, this should always be discussed with your child's GP or another qualified healthcare professional.

Babies who consume more than 500 mL of infant formula per day do not usually need additional vitamin supplements because infant formula is fortified with vitamins and minerals, including vitamin B12.

The Vegan Society's VEG 1 Baby and Toddler Liquid Multivitamin, suitable from 6 months of age, provides 5 µg of vitamin B12.

Drinks

During the first year of life, the only recommended drinks are:

- breastmilk or an appropriate infant formula
- small amounts of water from around 6 months of age (NHS 2022b)

Unsweetened soya milk (ideally fortified with calcium, vitamin D, riboflavin, vitamin B12 and iodine) can be used in cooking from around 6 months (Crawley 2025), but should not be given as a main drink until after 12 months of age (Office for Health Improvements & Disparities 2025).

Drinks containing sugars, sweeteners, caffeine, stimulants or certain additives are not suitable for young children. These include fruit juice, squash, fizzy drinks, rice drinks, tea, coffee and alcohol (NHS 2022b).

Vegan weaning meal ideas

Breakfast

- cooked oatmeal or iron-fortified cereal mashed with unsweetened fortified soya milk, thickened and served directly onto a tray or spoon
- soft fruit finger foods, such as banana (pinky-finger-sized strips), smashed or sliced thin strips of berries

- oatmeal pancakes (see recipe here), sliced into finger-width slices and served with a thin smear of nut butter and/or a sprinkle of ground chia or hemp seeds
- toast with crusts removed, sliced into pinky-finger-sized strips and served with a thin smear of nut butter or hummus.

Lunch/evening meal

- penne pasta cooked until soft and easy to mash makes a good finger food
- beans, chickpeas or lentils, smashed or used to make a pureed 'hummus' or 'meat' balls
- cooked potatoes, including sweet potatoes, peeled and sliced into pinky-finger-sized shapes or mashed
- vegetables, sliced into pinky-finger-sized strips or mashed, such as cooked and peeled bell peppers, cooked broccoli, peeled butternut squash, cooked green beans (halved and any pointed ends removed)
- avocado (with the skin removed), sliced into pinky-finger-sized strips

Nutrition from 1 to 4 years

Plant-based milks

Between 1 and 4 years of age, some families choose to move from breastmilk or formula to a plant-based milk as their child's main milk drink.

If doing so, choose an unsweetened plant-based milk that is ideally fortified with calcium, vitamin D, riboflavin, vitamin B12 and iodine. Always check the ingredient list to ensure there are no added sugars or sweeteners (Office for Health Improvements & Disparities 2025; BSACI 2026.).

Fortified soya milk is usually the most nutritionally similar to cows' milk because it provides a good balance of protein, fat and energy (Office for Health Improvements & Disparities 2025). Unsweetened fortified almond and oat drinks can also be an acceptable alternative to cows' milk, but, because they are lower in protein, it is important that children eat a variety of protein-rich foods across the day (Office for Health Improvements & Disparities 2025; BSACI 2026.).

Rice milk should be avoided for children under 5 years due to concerns about the arsenic content (BASCI 2026.; Committee on Toxicity of Chemicals in Food, Consumer Products and the Environment 2016).

Plant-based toddler or 'growing-up' drinks are not recommended due to their free sugars content (Office for Health Improvements & Disparities 2025; BSACI 2026.).

Focus on energy density

Young children have high energy and nutrient needs, but relatively small appetites. Because wholefood vegan diets can be high in fibre, meals and snacks should be energy-dense to help children meet their nutritional needs without feeling too full.

Helpful strategies for increasing energy and nutrient density include:

- use lower fibre starchy foods, such as white rice or white pasta, alongside wholegrain options
- include higher protein grains, such as quinoa
- add extra energy to meals using ground nuts* and seeds*, nut and seed butters*, vegetable oils, avocado and vegan spreads

Low-fat or 'light' products are not generally recommended for young children due to their high energy needs (British Nutrition Foundation 2026b).

Calcium

Calcium is found in a range of plant foods, including calcium-set tofu, tahini, beans, pak choi, okra, broccoli, dried figs, ground chia seeds and almonds (ground or as nut butter).

However, fortified plant-based milks and yoghurts can be a particularly helpful source, especially if children are not accepting enough wholefood sources to meet their calcium needs.

Because calcium can reduce iron absorption (Li et al. 2025), it can be helpful to:

- offer calcium-fortified milk drinks no more than twice per day
- avoid giving them at the same time as iron-rich meals

Iron

From 1 year of age, iron requirements reduce slightly to 6.9 mg per day, but iron-rich foods remain important for children on a vegan diet (British Nutrition Foundation 2021.).

Good sources include:

- beans, lentils and chickpeas
- tofu
- ground nuts* and seeds*

- quinoa
- kale
- dried fruits
- fortified breakfast cereals

Pair iron-rich foods with vitamin C-rich foods (such as peppers, broccoli, cabbage, citrus fruits, kiwi or berries) to help improve absorption (Basrowi and Dilantika 2021).

Iodine, vitamin B12 and omega 3 fatty acids

UK guidance recommends that children aged 6 months to 5 years receive supplements containing vitamins A, C and D. The exception is infants under 12 months who drink 500 mL or more of infant formula each day because infant formula is fortified with these vitamins (NHS 2024).

For vegan children, vitamin B12 and iodine also need particular attention (Verduci et al. 2025).

Vitamin B12

Vitamin B12 is found in unsweetened fortified plant-based milks, nutritional yeast and some dairy-free spreads. However, as a safety net, you may wish to consider a daily supplement of around 5 µg, especially if the intake of fortified foods is low (Norris n.d.).

Iodine

Iodine levels can vary greatly in plant foods and iodised salt is not currently recommended in the UK for young children (World Health Organization 2014; Bath 2026; Leung et al. 2015). Once breastmilk or formula intake is reduced, an iodine supplement may be considered on a case-by-case basis (Koeder, 2024), but this should be discussed with your child's GP or qualified healthcare professional as an excessive intake can be harmful (Leung et al. 2015).

Omega 3 fatty acids

All children should have a daily source of essential omega 3 fats, such as:

- ground chia seeds*
- ground linseed (flaxseed)*
- ground hemp seeds*
- ground walnuts*

Some families may choose to use a DHA supplement derived from microalgae, particularly if dietary sources of omega 3 fats are limited. Evidence on the long-term benefits in childhood is still limited, so supplementation should be considered on an individual basis (Woźniak et al. 2022; Huynh et al. 2023).

Further information

- See here for an in-depth guide on vegan under-fives from the First Steps Nutrition Trust
- The Plant-Based Baby & Toddler by dietitians Whitney English and Alexandra Caspero (note that nutrient recommendations in this book are based on US guidance and differ from UK recommendations)

Disclaimer

This guide is not designed to replace advice from health professionals. Please discuss the use of supplements with a health professional to help ensure that they are suitable for you. If you have any concerns about your vegan diet, please ask your doctor for a referral to a registered dietitian.

We recognise that not everyone who is pregnant, gives birth, or breastfeeds identifies as a woman or a mother. We aim to use inclusive language throughout this resource to reflect the diversity of families. The term 'woman' or 'women' is only used when this refers to specific research.

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