

Tap the Power of Protein

Protein, an essential nutrient, has been frequently touted as a cure-all: Use it to boost your energy, build strength, lose weight, or enhance your athletic performance, the ads say. But most adults in the U.S. already get more than enough protein to meet their body's demands, and the benefits of eating even more aren't especially clear. "Most of us are not at risk of failing to consume enough protein," says Barbara Rolls, Ph.D., the Helen A. Guthrie Chair of nutritional sciences at Pennsylvania State University.

There is one important exception: People 70 and older, especially women, may not be getting enough protein, partly because food intake tends to decline with age. In fact, a new study in the *Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics* reveals that up to 24 percent of them are protein deficient, which could harm their overall health.

HOW MUCH SHOULD I EAT? Protein is the main building block of most of our cells. Our bodies use about 210 grams of the stuff daily. While the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and nutritional agencies recommend that 10 percent to 35 percent of your calories come from protein, that message offers more confusion than clarity.

"It's a very large range, and if your total calories go down, then your percentage from protein goes up regardless of how much you ate," Rolls says. "What matters is how much actual protein you consume." Here's a good basic target for adults up to age 65: A 120-pound person should aim for at least 48 grams of protein daily; a 180-pound person should aim for at least 72 grams of protein daily. Protein intake for adults over 65 is slightly higher. To figure out your own protein goals, you multiply your weight by 0.4. (A sandwich with 3 ounces of chicken along with one cup of 1 percent milk is about 40 grams of protein.) Over age 65? Multiply your weight by 0.6 to reach your protein daily dose. Also important to remember is to eat protein throughout the day to reduce their loss of muscle mass.

DO ATHLETES NEED MORE? Serious athletes and bodybuilders need more protein than the general population because their muscles require it to compensate for muscle breakdown during heavy exercise. A good rule of thumb for this group is to get about 1 gram of protein per pound of body weight each day. But even that amount usually doesn't require a supplement.

"While research shows that protein requirements are higher for athletes to aid in muscle repair and growth, most athletes are already consuming more protein than their bodies can process," states the website of the U.S. Anti-Doping Agency, which polices supplement use by U.S. Olympians. Increasing your protein intake past the amount your body can use isn't going to help you get bigger or stronger. So there's no need to take the megadoses of protein that some supplements offer.

CAN TOO MUCH PROTEIN BE HARMFUL?

A high-protein diet can worsen kidney function tests in people with kidney disease. Think that warning doesn't apply to you? A vast majority of people with kidney disease don't know it because the damage occurs so slowly. Cleveland Clinic researchers speculate that one in five overweight adults has at least a mild form of kidney disease. And when they analyzed the habits of more than 10,000 overweight adults in a 2012 study, they found that many had tried high-protein diets in an attempt to lose weight, putting their kidneys at risk. Excessive protein intake over the long-term might also cause calcium to be excreted from bones, increasing the risk of osteoporosis and fractures.

There are also inherent dangers in taking protein supplements, which have soared in use. The Food and Drug Administration doesn't test these supplements for safety before they reach the market, making them a potential source of dangerous substances, such as amphetamines or steroids. And a 2010 CONSUMER REPORTS investigation found that some protein shakes, if consumed frequently, could expose people to potentially toxic levels of arsenic, cadmium, and lead.

WHAT ARE THE BEST SOURCES? Protein is found in everything from meat to seeds, but what's noteworthy is how many essential amino acids each source provides. There are eight amino acids that must be obtained through our diet because our bodies can't make them, these are the essential amino acids. That's important because those essential amino acids play a pivotal role in metabolism, bolstering your health and creating critical *new* protein molecules.

Complete proteins are animal-based (meat, poultry, fish, milk, eggs, and cheese) and provide all eight essential amino acids. But don't use that as a reason to binge at the butcher shop. Several studies have reported that red meat can increase the risk of cardiovascular disease as well as certain cancers and type 2 diabetes. Incomplete proteins are plant-based (legumes, grains, nuts, seeds, and vegetables) and each is low in one or more of the essential acids, so vegetarians need to vary their sources. For example, eating rice and beans together should provide a complete mix of the amino acids. Any combination of corn-, rice-, wheat-, or soy-based proteins will provide the acids you need. Of this group, soy comes closest to being a complete protein.

The good news, though: It's probably a lot easier for you to consume enough protein every day than you might think. Here is the breakdown that shows which foods really have it and which pack less of what you need.

Cow's milk (1 percent, 1 cup)	8 grams protein
Nonfat Greek yogurt (plain, 6 ounces)	17 grams protein
Pumpkin seeds (dried, 1 ounce)	9 grams protein
Quinoa (cooked, 1 cup)	8 grams protein
Sockeye salmon (cooked, 3 ounces)	22 grams protein
Almond milk (vanilla-flavored, 1 cup)	1 gram protein
Lowfat yogurt (plain, 6 ounces)	9 grams protein
Cashew nuts (dry-roasted, 1 ounce)	4 grams protein
White rice (medium grain, cooked, 1 cup)	4 grams protein
Oven-roasted turkey breast (3 slices)	11 grams protein

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