

THE TRUTH ABOUT PROTEIN

Everyone's talking about it as the best way to lose weight and get strong, but is protein really the MVP of nutrients? We get to the meat of the matter.

BY MALLORY CREVELING

WITH LOTS OF BUZZ about protein in the news, it's easy to wonder whether the nutrient lives up to all the hype. You do need protein for a healthy body—it stabilizes blood sugar levels and repairs and maintains muscle tissues. However, while most Americans already get enough, it's often from the wrong sources, and sometimes we consume too much. To help you fill your plate with the right foods (and occasionally make the switch from sirloin to salmon), we've put everything you need to know about the nutrient on the table.

How Much Do You Need?

The goal for most women should be about 46 grams a day. When reviewing your daily meals, check that protein accounts for 10% to 35% of your calories—in a 2,000-calorie diet, that's a minimum of 50 grams and a max of 175. To fine-tune your numbers and get a list of protein-rich options, go to familycircle.com/proteinchart.

Q&A

Are powders, bars or shakes good sources of protein?

Not really. It's better to eat whole foods, which provide a sufficient amount of protein along with other vitamins and minerals. Plus, most of these products contain way too much sugar, says Kathy McManus, RD, director of the department of nutrition at Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston. If you enjoy them now and then, look for 5 grams or less of sugar on the label.



DYNAMIC DUOS

By pairing these non-meat sources, you're dishing up all the essential amino acids you need (the ones your body can't make) in one mini meal.

- ▶ ½ cup **cottage cheese** + 15 **whole-grain crackers** (like Wheat Thins) = **16 grams protein**
- ▶ A big handful (about 25) **almonds** + 8 ounces **low-fat vanilla yogurt** = **13 grams protein**
- ▶ ½ cup **brown rice** + ½ cup **black beans** = **10 grams protein**
- ▶ ½ cup **soba noodles** + ¼ cup **peanut dressing** = **7 grams protein**



CHART TOPPERS

You may be eating more than one portion of meat, poultry or fish at each meal. A serving is 3 ounces*, the size of a deck of cards, and the USDA recommends 5½ ounces per day for women. (FC balances super-strict and super-sized, averaging 5 ounces a recipe.) Here's how rich protein sources stack up.



Edamame (1 cup, cooked)
19 grams



Lentils (1 cup, cooked)
18 grams



Black beans (1 cup, canned)
15 grams



Peanuts (1½ ounces)
12 grams



Chickpeas (1 cup, canned)
11 grams



Spinach (1 cup, cooked)
5 grams



Chicken breast (3 ounces, grilled)
26 grams



Tuna (3 ounces, cooked)
25 grams



Steak (3 ounces, grilled)
24 grams



Plain Greek yogurt (6-ounce container)
17 grams



Skim milk (1 cup)
8 grams



Eggs (1, hard-boiled)
6 grams

*1 ounce of meat, poultry or fish equals ¼ cup of cooked beans or ½ ounce of nuts.

TRUE or FALSE?

If I have a big steak for dinner, I've satisfied my daily protein requirement.

FALSE It's best to eat smaller amounts throughout the day and alternate the foods you choose. "We need to consistently deliver essential amino acids to our bodies. These are nutrients we don't make ourselves, so we have to get them from our diet," says Nancy Rodriguez, PhD, RD, professor of nutritional sciences at the University of Connecticut. "You should get a variety at every meal." She suggests women aim for 10 to 15 grams of protein per snack and 20 to 25 grams at breakfast, lunch and dinner. (See "Chart Toppers" to find out how much is in everyday foods.)

I need meat at every meal.

FALSE If you tend to have eggs at breakfast, turkey at lunch and pork at dinner, that's overdoing it, says Garth Davis, MD, author of *Proteinaholic*. Replace two of your meat meals a week with fish, and replace some of the meat in other dishes with 1 to 2 cups of beans—most Americans don't eat enough seafood and legumes. Also, try to add as many plant sources of protein as possible to your daily menu: They can lower the risk of heart disease and premature death. "Protein is very important—so much so that nature provides it in just about everything we eat," Davis says. "If you're regularly having greens, beans and whole grains, you'll get enough."

Diets high in animal protein can pose health risks.

TRUE Researchers have linked excess consumption of red meat to heart disease and processed meats to colon cancer, which is why the American Cancer Society suggests limiting foods like hot dogs, sausage, bacon and steak.

Too much protein damages your kidneys and bones.

FALSE When you eat way more than the recommended amount of protein (see "How Much Do You Need?," page 93), your body doesn't store the extra. Instead, it generates by-products, which most of us eliminate through our urine—meaning it won't pose problems for healthy women, says Rodriguez. (However, anyone who already has poor renal function should cut back on protein.) Also, despite previous thinking that too much protein can damage your bones, several studies have proved otherwise—particularly when looking at milk and soy products. Keep in mind that you do need calcium for extra protection.

All proteins are created equal.

FALSE Animal sources are considered complete proteins, because they contain all nine of the essential amino acids your body requires. Plant-based sources are usually missing one or two of these vital amino acids, but eating a mix of produce will help you consume the entire lineup.

Kids Need Protein Too

Teens who eat a high-protein morning meal often consume 400 fewer calories per day compared to those who have about 15 grams. Also, eating protein-packed snacks in the afternoon keeps kids from choosing unhealthy foods later in the day, thanks to better appetite control. And those mini meals are great homework helpers, improving mood and focus.