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INTRODUCTION

THE PERFECT AMOUNT OF PROTEIN FOR YOU

If a little protein with each meal is great for building lean muscles, keeping us fuller longer and, well, keeping our bodies functioning, wouldn't eating more protein be even better? Not so fast.

BY HOLLY PEVZNER

Whether they are getting it from a sizzling steak, a plant-based bowl, a packaged snack or even infused water, Americans are obsessed with protein. Fifty-five percent of households make a special point to seek out high-protein foods when grocery shopping, according to a Nielsen report. "I think a big piece of the allure is the idea that protein can help you stay fuller longer and lose weight," says protein researcher Jamie I. Baum, Ph.D., director of the Center for Human Nutrition at the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville. And it can. Higher-protein meals decrease hunger and increase satiety better than lower-protein meals, confirms a 2018 report in the journal *Nutrients*. Protein takes longer to digest than other eats, and it signals the release of satiety hormones,

which can often lead to weight loss or healthy weight maintenance.

There's a difference between high protein and excessive protein, though. "A lot of people believe that the more protein you eat, the better, but that's not necessarily true," says Baum. Think about it like this: if more protein automatically meant better weight management, more lean muscles and improved health, then double cheeseburgers and their 49 grams of protein might be the ultimate health food. Instead, the benefits that arise from consuming protein go beyond quantity. It's about quality. It's about timing. And it's about what else you're eating.

Protein Basics

Protein (which is a chain of amino acids) is what nutritionists like to call a building block, meaning





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IF YOU'RE OVER 40, YOU MIGHT NEED MORE PROTEIN THAN THE RECOMMENDED DAILY ALLOWANCE.

“protein is part of every cell in the body; no living tissue can be built without it,” says Baum. In short: we need protein to live. It builds bones and muscles, forms blood cells, keeps the immune response in check, provides energy, helps repair cells and more. While the body is excellent at churning out most of the amino acids we require, there are nine essential ones that our bodies simply can’t make, so we need to get them through food. Animal-based proteins, like meat and dairy, contain good amounts of all essential amino acids. “Soy protein is very close to the same amount, and pulses are also right there,” says registered dietitian Sharon Palmer, author of several books, including *California Vegan*. But our bodies are not designed to take what we need from the protein we eat and hoard the rest in reserves for later use. “There definitely seems to be a max amount of protein that you can consume at any one meal that can turn on protein synthesis, which is the process in which

cells make proteins,” says Douglas Paddon-Jones, Ph.D., a professor of nutrition and metabolism at the University of Texas Medical Branch at Galveston. And that raises the question: how much protein should we eat?

How Much Protein You Need

The National Academy of Medicine (the minds behind the recommended daily dietary allowance, or RDA) states that most adults get a minimum of 0.8 gram of protein for every kilogram of body weight daily, on average. That’s a bit over 7 grams of protein for every 20 pounds you carry. In other words, if you’re 150 pounds, that comes to about 55 grams of protein a day. Paddon-Jones, however, doesn’t necessarily suggest following this guideline to the number. “These recommendations are for the minimum quantity of protein needed to prevent deficiency. It’s not the recommended amount for optimal function,” he says.

Settling on an optimum protein recommendation is tricky because protein is a very individual thing. The ideal amount each person needs shifts with factors such as pregnancy status, age, sex, activity level, body composition and general health. For instance, while highly trained athletes may benefit from more than 27 grams of protein per 20 pounds of weight daily, everyday exercisers looking to build muscle likely only need up to 18 grams per 20 pounds daily, according to a 2017 study in the *Journal of the International Society of Sports Nutrition*. And older adults should aim for “69 to 81 grams for a 150-pound person,” says Katie Dodd, R.D.N., a geriatric dietitian in Medford, Oregon. While “older adults” usually means age 65 and up, a 2018 report in the journal *Nutrients* suggested that it may be a better idea to include middle-agers as well. The study noted that the current RDA for protein for adults is likely insufficient for muscle mass and strength maintenance for folks older than 40. This is about the time frame when the muscle-aging process begins, making it a good time for implementing dietary changes (aka more protein) to help prevent or delay sarcopenia, which is the loss of muscle mass with age. “If protein is ignored, it can contribute to muscle loss, and then down the road, it’ll increase one’s risk of falls, hospitalizations and injury from being weak,” says Dodd. Bottom line: if you’re a relatively healthy adult, think of the RDA as a baseline.

Are We Getting Enough?

On the surface, it sure looks that way. Most healthy adults clock about 90 grams of protein a day, which exceeds the RDA, according to a 2019 study in the *Journal of Nutrition, Health & Aging*. However, the same report found that about 33% of people over age 50 fail to hit the minimum. (“One of the reasons is that some older adults simply eat less all around,” says Dodd.) In addition, an earlier report in the *Journal of Nutrition* found that people consume about 40% of their daily protein at dinner. “When you eat all of that protein at once, you’re missing out on some of the benefits,” says Paddon-Jones, who co-authored the study. His research concluded that consuming a moderate amount of protein three times a day is optimal. That means, in part, don’t forget breakfast, which is something that 1 in 10

THE PROTEIN PUZZLE

The National Academy of Medicine recommends that adults get a minimum of just over 7 grams of protein for every 20 pounds of body weight. But that’s just the minimum to avoid deficiency. Here are some considerations for raising your protein levels.

An Average, Healthy Person:

7 to 12 grams per 20 pounds of body weight

Muscle Building: 12 to 18 grams per 20 pounds of body weight

Vegan: 8 to 10 grams per 20 pounds of body weight

Older Adults: 9 to 11 grams per 20 pounds of body weight

Pregnant Women: 11 grams per 20 pounds of body weight

Americans do, according to the NPD Group, a marketing research company. “If you skip breakfast, you skip a real opportunity to utilize your daily protein properly,” says Paddon-Jones. For example, having a high-protein breakfast can lead to improved satiety and reduced snacking, according to research in the *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition*. Of course, to best utilize properly timed protein, it’s important to choose the right sources.

Some Proteins Are Better Than Others

“In general, to be considered a good source of protein, a whole food should contain around 7 grams,” says Palmer. And while, in theory, 7 grams is 7 grams no matter where you get it, not all protein is created equal, even if a 2017 survey found that 69% of folks believe that the source doesn’t really matter. “People see protein on the label, and they automatically think ‘Oh, this is a good thing,’” says Paddon-Jones. “But there are packaged foods that have some protein sprinkled in, and suddenly it’s supposed to be a healthy food. It’s not.” After all, protein is not delivered by itself. It comes in food, complete with other nutrients—or lack of nutrients.

Take protein bars: “Say your bar claims to

PROTEIN CONTENT IN COMMON FOODS

3 ounces beef, chicken, turkey, pork or lamb	23 g
3 ounces fish (such as tuna)	23 g
3 ounces tofu	8 g
1 egg	6 g
½ cup lentils.....	8 g
2 tablespoons peanut butter.....	7 g
8 ounces milk (whole, skim or 1%).....	8 g
5 ounces Greek yogurt, (plain, nonfat or light)	12 to 18 g

have 7 grams of protein, but it's 200 or 300 calories and high in sugar," says Baum. "What are you really gaining from eating it? If you're replacing a candy bar, maybe that's a good thing. But if it's just to get protein, you should think it through a little more." Another source that requires more thought is protein powder. "Isolated plant proteins are fine to include in your diet, but you won't get all the benefits you would if you ate a whole plant food," says Palmer, noting that fiber is important for that right-away full feeling, while protein helps you stay fuller longer. With that, adding a scoop or two of whey protein in your a.m. smoothie is A-OK once in a while for folks who are too time crunched to make eggs or turkey bacon or for those who struggle to get enough protein. And then there are all those plant-based crumbles and burgers. "These can certainly count as a protein serving and are fine to include here and there," says Palmer, who notes that it's still best to focus mostly on whole plant foods for max benefits. "Also, a lot of these products only have 1 or 2 grams of protein per serving, so always read labels."

Are Animal Sources Best?

Up to 85% of America's protein intake comes from animal sources, such as eggs, dairy and meat, according to a 2019 report from the journal *Nutrients*. And that's too much. It's not that animal-based proteins are bad. They're not. "They're

actually complete protein sources, meaning they contain all of the essential amino acids we need," says Dodd. It's just that, by and large, Americans are choosing animal-based proteins over alternative and healthy sources of protein, such as seafood, nuts, seeds and soy. And when red meat tops your go-to list, "you really need to look at how much you're eating and the saturated-fat content," says Baum. Regularly eating red and processed meat can increase the risk of type 2 diabetes, coronary heart disease, stroke and certain cancers.

The American Institute for Cancer Research recommends eating less than 18 ounces of red meat a week. (A serving size of cooked meat or poultry is 3 ounces and about the size of a deck of cards.) When choosing any meat, go for lean or low-fat cuts, like 93% lean ground beef, pork loin and skinless chicken breasts. And be sure to include a variety of nutrient-rich seafood, like salmon and trout, into the mix—almost 90% of Americans don't meet the recommended 8 to 10 ounces of seafood a week. A 3-ounce serving of meat, poultry or fish hovers at around 23 grams of protein; 2 large eggs have 12 grams; and an 8-ounce glass of milk has 8 grams.

Why Plant-Based Proteins Are Important

According to a 2019 report from the International Food Information Council, one-quarter of people were eating more plant-based protein than they were one year earlier. That's great news, especially since a 2020 *BMJ* study found that replacing red meat with high-quality plant-based proteins, such as beans, nuts or soy, appears to reduce one's risk of coronary heart disease. Another study, this one out of Harvard, noted that swapping 5% of animal protein with plant protein is associated with an almost 50% lower risk of mortality. Part of the reason: "Plant protein sources are full of fiber, nutrients, phytochemicals, and they're also low in saturated fat, sodium and preservatives," says Palmer.

Plant-based proteins fill you up just as well as animal sources. Researchers from the University of Copenhagen gave 35 healthy men meals based around fava beans or split peas; pork or veal; and eggs and found zero differences across the meals in terms of hunger, satiety and fullness.



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ADD GREEK YOGURT AND NUT BUTTER INTO A SMOOTHIE FOR A HEALTHY DOSE OF PROTEIN.

The trick, says Palmer, is ensuring that your plant-based meal is balanced. "You need fiber, fat and protein together, so don't just have the tofu, for example. Have a tofu stir-fry with vegetables and brown rice." Consider adding some of these plant-based proteins to your mix: tofu (8 grams of protein per 3-ounce serving); beans and lentils (6 to 8 grams per ½ cup); soy milk (6 grams per cup); peanut butter (7 grams per 2 tablespoons); and quinoa (8 grams per cup).

Is Too Much Protein an Issue?

If you're at risk for kidney disease or you're dealing with any other kidney issues, too much protein is not a good idea. (Excess can cause waste to build in the blood that's difficult for the kidneys to remove, Baum points out.) Exactly how much is too much for you can be determined by a health care professional.

The bigger health issues come from consuming a lot of red meat and saturated fat, and simply overeating in general. Remember, bodies can't store protein, so once you've sapped its usefulness, the rest converts to either energy or fat. Also, "when you're hyper-focused on protein, you're likely missing out on other important nutrients," says Baum.

Unsure where you're at with your own protein intake? Baum recommends tracking your diet for a week or so to pinpoint your biggest sources and your protein timing. "From there, look for opportunities to increase protein intake from a variety of healthy sources," she says. And don't get too lost in all of the math. Instead, "go meal by meal and spread your healthy proteins throughout the day," says Paddon-Jones. "And if you start, say, eating an egg for breakfast instead of a Pop Tart, then things can only get better." ●