

Healthy Sources of Protein

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Humans need protein to live. But not all proteins are created equal, and it *is* possible to have too much of a good thing.

In fact, it turns out that the most important thing about protein is not how much you eat, but where your protein comes from.

Protein in the Body

Protein is one of the building blocks for nearly every type of tissue in the body, including bones, cartilage, muscle, blood, and skin. Known as an essential macronutrient, there are more than 10,000 different proteins in the human body.

Protein is also a component of the enzymes and hormones that regulate many of our bodily processes. We literally cannot live without it.

Daily Protein Intake

It is possible to eat too much protein. Very high-protein diets are associated with a higher risk of developing kidney stones, heart disease, and colon cancer.

The recommended daily protein intake for healthy adults is roughly 7 grams of protein for every 20 pounds of body weight. So for a person that weighs 160 pounds, that pencils out to 56 grams of protein per day.

On average, a typical person should aim for between 50-70 grams of protein per day. There may be exceptions for patients with specific circumstances or health conditions.

A varied diet will easily provide an appropriate amount of protein, even for vegetarians. But a long-term Harvard study concluded that the *source* of dietary protein was more important than the *amount*.

Complete Proteins

Proteins in the human body are made from 20 amino acids. Some foods – mostly but not always animal products – contain all 20 amino acids. These are commonly called “complete proteins.”

Many plant-based foods lack one or more amino acids. Vegetarians are often encouraged to combine complementary foods to get complete proteins. Complementary foods should be consumed over the course of a day, not necessarily at every meal.

Some amino acids can be manufactured in the body, but nine of them only come from food. The ones that come from food are called essential amino acids.

Protein deficiency resulting from a lack of essential amino acids is extremely rare except in cases of food insecurity or disordered eating. In most cases, a varied diet will provide sufficient essential amino acids without the need for complicated calculations.

The Protein Package

We tend to categorize foods, thinking of steak as a protein and oatmeal as a carb. But foods are complex packages of macro and micronutrients – nutrients your body needs in large or small amounts to function and give you energy.

More important than the concept of the complete protein is the “protein package,” or the additional nutrients you take in when you eat proteins. Along with the 33 grams of protein in that steak, you are also eating 5 grams of saturated fat.

Protein, Saturated Fat, and Other Additives

The American Heart Association recommends aiming for a diet that achieves less than 6% of total calories from saturated fat.

So for example, the recommended number of calories for a moderately active adult is 2000 per day. Calculating 6% of that figure = the same adult should aim for 13 grams of saturated fat per day or less in their diet.

Many of the foods that are celebrated for their high protein content conflict with a heart healthy diet because they are heavily processed or are high in saturated fat.

Although cholesterol content is not itself a risk factor, it is often part of a protein package that contains a lot of salt and saturated fats. Consider the all-beef burger with a side of fries or a breakfast of eggs and bacon.

Even protein powders may contain a variety of non-protein ingredients, including vitamins and minerals, thickeners, added sugars, non-caloric sweeteners, and artificial flavoring. These are things to be aware of when choosing your protein sources.

For a healthy lifestyle, it's essential to eat enough protein, but without too much salt and saturated or trans fats.

Does Timing Matter?

Protein timing, that is consuming protein just before or after exercise, is often thought of as critical to maximizing the benefits of exercise. Although this may seem logical, scientific evidence does not back up that claim.

High-level athletes and competitive bodybuilders may benefit from timed consumption of protein. But for most individuals, downing a protein shake or power bar before your 3x/week half hour on the treadmill is more likely to boost your overall calorie intake than to enhance muscle growth.

Healthy Protein Sources

Here are some healthy sources of protein to incorporate into your diet:

Legumes

It's hard to beat legumes for a healthy protein package.

Legumes include beans, chickpeas, lentils, peas, and peanuts. Eating them can increase fullness, which may lead to better weight management and weight loss.

Besides relatively high protein content (from 7-18 grams/cup), legumes are low in fat and high in fiber.

Although protein-rich, soy-based products like tofu and tempeh are processed products and so may be lower in fiber and other nutrients than whole soybeans.

Nuts and Seeds

With nuts and seeds, a little goes a long way. These calorie-dense foods provide protein alongside heart-healthy unsaturated fats.

A one ounce serving is about:

- 23 almonds
- 14 walnut halves
- 18 cashews, or
- 19 pecan halves.

One serving of almonds contains almost as much protein as an egg. Adding a single serving of nuts is a great way to boost the protein content of salads and other vegetarian dishes.

Meat

Meat is high in protein but should be consumed with caution. To avoid a protein package that is high in saturated fat and sodium, choose poultry (except duck) and seafood instead of processed meats like hamburger, bologna, and sausage.

Other Animal Sources

In the past, eggs were blamed as a cause of high cholesterol, but this claim has since been proven false. However, they should still be consumed in moderation, because their protein content and fat content are roughly equal at 5-8 grams per egg.

Similarly, many dairy products also deliver a lot of fat with their protein. For a healthy option choose lower fat products like skim milk and skyr over whole milk and hard cheeses.

In Conclusion

Humans need protein to survive. And it's not just how much protein you eat, but where you get the protein that matters. In addition, those protein choices determine how much additional nutrients like fiber, salt, and saturated fats you take in.

The recommended daily protein intake for healthy adults is roughly 7 grams of protein for every 20 pounds of body weight. Eating too much protein has been shown to cause health problems over time. Striking a healthy balance between protein intake and low salt and unhealthy fats is the goal.

If you need guidance on how to incorporate more healthy protein sources into your diet, request an appointment with a WWMG Primary Care provider today.

The WWMG team also includes Registered Dietitian Nutritionist Meghann Moore, who provides nutrition and lifestyle counseling to patients who need additional support. We're here to help.