

## The Power of Protein

Protein is one powerful nutrient. An adequate protein intake in the diet is important across the life cycle, especially as we age. Protein is a macronutrient used by the body for building, repairing, and maintaining tissues. The body's structural components, such as skin, muscles, and organs, are made up largely by protein. And it's also a good source of energy.

- Proteins are made up of amino acids. There are 20 different amino acids.
- Nine amino acids are considered 'essential' since they are not made by the body and therefore must be obtained from food.
- Eleven amino acids are made by the body and are considered non-essential amino acids.



The proteins in our bodies are constantly being broken down and replaced. The body does not store protein as it does carbohydrates and fats (the two other macronutrients), so the body needs a daily supply of smaller protein chains, called peptides, broken down as amino acids, that are absorbed into the bloodstream and transported to the tissues in our bodies.

It is safe to say that protein is a key part of any diet. The average person needs about 7 grams of protein every day for every 20 pounds of body weight. Because protein is found in an abundance of foods, many people can easily meet this goal. However, not all protein "packages" are created equal. Because foods contain a lot more than protein, it's important to pay attention to what else is coming with it. It's important to choose healthy protein foods.

**Get your protein from plants when possible.** Eating legumes (beans and peas), nuts, and seeds, whole grains, and other plant-based sources of protein is a win for your health and the health of the planet. If most of your protein comes from plants, make sure that you mix up your sources so no "essential" components of protein are missing. The good news is that the plant kingdom offers plenty of options to mix and match. Here are some examples for each category:

- ✓ **Legumes:** lentils, beans (adzuki, black, fava, chickpeas/garbanzo, kidney, lima, mung, pinto etc.), peas (green, snow, snap, split, etc.), edamame/soybeans (and products made from soy: tofu, tempeh, etc.), peanuts.

- ✓ **Nuts and Seeds:** almonds, pistachios, cashews, walnuts, hazelnuts, pecans, hemp seeds, squash and pumpkin seeds, sunflower seeds, flax seeds, sesame seeds, chia seeds.
- ✓ **Whole Grains:** kamut, teff, wheat, quinoa, rice, wild rice, millet, oats, buckwheat.
- ✓ **Other:** while many vegetables and fruits contain some level of protein, it's generally in smaller amounts than the other plant-based foods. Some examples with higher protein quantities include corn, broccoli, asparagus, brussel sprouts, and artichokes.

**Upgrade your sources of animal protein.** Considering the protein package is particularly important when it comes to animal-based foods:

- ✓ Generally, **poultry** (chicken, turkey, duck) and a variety of seafood (fish, crustaceans, mollusks) are your best bet. Eggs can be a good choice, too.
- ✓ If you enjoy **dairy foods**, it's best to do so in moderation (think closer to 1-2 servings a day; and incorporating yogurt is probably a better choice than getting all your servings from milk or cheese).
- ✓ **Red meat**—which includes unprocessed beef, pork, lamb, veal, mutton, and goat meat—should be consumed on a more limited basis. If you enjoy red meat, consider eating it in small amounts or only on special occasions.
- ✓ **Processed meats**, such as bacon, hot dogs, sausages, and cold cuts should be avoided. Although these products are often made from red meats, processed meats also include items like turkey bacon, chicken sausage, and deli-sliced chicken and ham. (Processed meat refers to any meat that has been “transformed through salting, curing, fermentation, smoking, or other processes to enhance flavor or improve preservation”).



If you are looking to reduce red and processed meats, here are a few approaches to cutting-back while keeping your meals satiating and flavorful. *Simply find your "starting point" and move forward with the strategies that work for you:*

### **Eat a little less red meat, any way you can**

Assess how often you eat red meat and see if one of these strategies can help you find a way to cut back a bit.

### **Swap out red meat for healthier meats**

If you're thinking of a meal that features red meat, see if you can replace it with a better option, like poultry or seafood.

### **Consume less meat, enjoy more variety**

This approach boosts healthy plant-based foods like beans, nuts, whole grains, and other veggies, while still providing ways to incorporate some of your favorite animal-based foods.

*Getting enough protein daily is essential for your overall health. And how much protein you need to consume per day depends on factors like your body size, activity levels, age, and even pregnancy status. Some people need more protein than others. However, it's important that everyone gets optimal amounts of protein by eating protein-rich foods regularly.*

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