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Facts and Myths About Protein

By Andrea Holwegner BSc, RD

Everything you ever wanted to know about protein rich foods:

Why do you need protein?

Protein is an essential nutrient (aka you must consume it regularly from foods for health). Our body needs protein from foods for structure and repair of all the cells of the body such as muscle and connective tissue. Proteins also function as enzymes, in membranes, as transport carriers and hormones. Amino acids which are the building blocks of protein also act as catalysts for many chemical reactions in the body. Protein is also required for production of antibodies to fight infection and for healthy skin, hair and fingernails.



Your body also uses protein for energy if it has been a very long time since you have eaten. In extreme cases if you were to follow a low-carb diet or fail to eat enough carbohydrate regularly your body breaks down muscle tissue and other body proteins to run the brain which leads to muscle loss, a lowered metabolic rate and weakened immunity.

How much do you need each day?

The Dietary Reference Intakes as suggested from the Institute of Medicine and recommended by Health Canada are as follows:

Acceptable Macronutrient Distribution Range (AMDR)

1-3 years of age	5-20 % of total calories
4-18 years of age	10-30% of total calories
Adults over the age of 18 years of age	10-35% of total calories

As an example, for an adult that consumes 2000 calories per day this is an amount approximately equal to 50-175 grams of protein each day. If your calorie needs are less than this range will be smaller and if your calorie needs are higher this range will be larger.

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Do athletes need more protein?

Athletes do require slightly higher amounts of protein for muscles repair and recovery but note that this does not necessarily mean they need to *eat* more protein since often our diets are high enough in protein. Most sports nutrition research suggests athletes should consume approximately 1.2 – 1.8 grams of protein per kilogram body weight.

Which foods supply protein?

When planning meals it is helpful to include a food that is rich in protein to help sustain energy and fullness since meals that are mostly carbohydrate often don't provide satiety.

Animal sources such as meat, poultry, seafood, eggs and dairy foods supply all nine essential amino acids and are therefore known as complete proteins. Protein from plant based foods such as legumes, grains, nuts, seeds and vegetables are known as incomplete proteins since they are missing one or more of the essential amino acids our body cannot produce by itself and must get from food.

In the past those following strict vegetarian (vegan) diets used food combining at each meal to make sure they received all the amino acids required to build a complete protein. We now know that this is not necessary and that as long as a wide variety of plant based foods are being supplied throughout the day, a strict vegetarian can achieve what they need.

For a complete listing of the amounts of protein in foods visit:

<http://www.healthstandnutrition.com/nutrient-databases/>

Who is at risk for getting too little protein?

Poorly planned vegetarian diets that consist of grains, fruit and vegetables but no legumes, nuts and seeds do not supply adequate protein. A properly planned vegetarian diet with a variety of plant-based foods can supply all the needed amino acid and protein the body requires.

Pregnant women require approximately 25 grams of additional protein per day during the second and third trimesters (and double this for twins).

Simply consuming a very low calorie diet can result in a protein deficiency such as what we see in our clients with an eating disorder or yo-yo dieting behaviors. Protein deficiency has been shown to affect all of the body's organs and many of its systems including functioning of the brain, immune system, kidneys and gut. Physical signs of protein deficiency include edema, poor growth in children, poor musculature, dull skin, thin/fragile hair.

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