



Choosing Healthy Protein

Tips for Getting High-Quality Protein in Your Diet



Protein provides energy and supports your mood and cognitive function. While it's in many of the foods that we eat every day, for something so common it's often a misunderstood part of our diets. Think of protein and you might think of steak sizzling on a grill, an energy bar touting to banish fatigue, or a protein shake promising amazing muscle growth. Yes, these foods are all packed with protein, but when it comes to making the best protein choices to keep your body and mind healthy, *quality* is just as important as *quantity*.

What is protein?

Protein is a vital nutrient required for building, maintaining, and repairing tissues, cells, and organs throughout the body. When you eat protein, it is broken down into the 20 amino acids that are the body's basic building blocks for growth and energy. The amino acid tryptophan influences mood by producing serotonin, which can reduce symptoms of depression and anxiety and improve overall cognitive function.

Most animal sources of protein, such as meat, poultry, fish, eggs, and dairy, deliver all the amino acids your body needs, while plant-based protein sources such as grains, beans, vegetables, and nuts often lack one or more of the essential amino acids. However, that doesn't mean you have to eat animal products to get the right amino acids. By eating a *variety* of plant-based sources of protein each day you can ensure your body gets all the essential amino acids it needs.

The health benefits of protein

Protein gives you the energy to get up and go—and keep going. While too much protein can be harmful to people with kidney disease, diabetes, and some other conditions, eating the right amount of high-quality protein:

- ▶ Keeps your immune system functioning properly, maintains heart health and your respiratory system, and speeds recovery after exercise
- ▶ Is vital to the growth and development of children and for [maintaining health in your senior years](http://www.helpguide.org/articles/healthy-eating/eating-well-as-you-age.htm) (<http://www.helpguide.org/articles/healthy-eating/eating-well-as-you-age.htm>)
- ▶ Can help reduce your risk for diabetes and cardiovascular disease
- ▶ Can help you think clearly and may improve recall
- ▶ Can improve your mood and boost your resistance to stress, anxiety, and depression
- ▶ May help you maintain a healthy weight by curbing appetite, making you feel full longer, and fueling you with extra energy for exercising.

As well as being imperative to feeling healthy and energetic, protein is also important to the way you look. Eating high-quality protein can help:

- ▶ Maintain healthy skin, nails, and hair
- ▶ Build muscle
- ▶ Maintain lean body mass while dieting

While most people eating a Western diet get sufficient *quantity* of protein each day, many of us are not getting the *quality* of protein we need.

High-quality vs. low-quality protein

Distinguishing between industrially raised meat and organic, grass-fed meat is only part of separating low- and high-quality sources of protein.

- ▶ While some processed or lunch meats, for example, can be a good source of protein, many are loaded with salt, which can cause high blood pressure and lead to other health problems.
- ▶ Processed meats have also been linked with an increased risk of cancer, likely due to the substances used in the processing of the meat.

The key to ensuring you eat sufficient high-quality protein is to include different types in your diet, rather than relying on just red or processed meat.

How much high-quality protein do you need?

Adults should eat at least 0.8g of protein per kilogram (2.2lb) of body weight per day. That means a 180lb man should eat at least 65 grams of high-quality protein per day. A higher intake may help to lower your risk for obesity, osteoporosis, type 2 diabetes, and stroke.

- Nursing women need about 20 grams more of high-quality protein a day than they did before pregnancy to support milk production.
- Older adults should aim for 1 to 1.5 grams of protein for each kilogram of weight (think 0.5g of protein per lb. of body weight if that's easier).
- Try to divide your protein intake equally among meals.

Source: *Environmental Nutrition*

Good sources of high-quality protein

Fish. Most seafood is high in protein and low in saturated fat. Fish such as salmon, trout, sardines, anchovies, sablefish (black cod), and herring are also high in omega-3 fatty acids. Experts recommend eating seafood at least twice a week.

Poultry. Removing the skin from chicken and turkey can substantially reduce the saturated fat. In the U.S., non-organic poultry may also contain antibiotics and been raised on GMO feed grown with pesticides, so opt for organic and free-range if possible.

Dairy products. Products such as skim milk, cheese, and yoghurt offer lots of healthy protein. Beware of added sugar in low-fat yoghurts and flavored milk, though, and skip processed cheese that often contains non-dairy ingredients.

Beans. Beans and peas are packed full of both protein and fiber. Add them to salads, soups and stews to boost your protein intake.

Nuts and seeds. As well as being rich sources of protein, nuts and seeds are also high in [fiber](/articles/healthy-eating/high-fiber-foods.htm) and “good” fats. Add to salads or keep handy for snacks.

Tofu and soy products. Non-GMO tofu and soy are excellent red meat alternatives, high in protein and low in fat. Try a “meatless Monday,” plant-based protein sources are often less expensive than meat so it can be as good for your wallet as it is for your health.

Good sources of protein

Nutrition values are approximate only; significant variations occur according to brand, cut of meat, cooking method, etc.

Food	Grams of protein
Canned tuna - 3 ounces	20
Salmon - 3 ounces	19
Turkey breast - 3 ounces	26
Chicken breast - 3 ounces	27
Skirt steak - 3 ounces	25
Ground beef (70% lean) - 3 ounces	22
Kidney beans - 1/3 cup	4
Black beans - 1/3 cup	5
Non-fat milk - 1/2 cup	4
Soy milk - 1/2 cup	4
Eggs - 1 large	6
Mozzarella cheese - 3 ounces	19
Cheddar - 3 ounces	19
Low-fat cottage cheese - 1/2 cup	12
Peanut butter - 2 tbsp.	7

Good sources of protein

Almonds - 1/4 cup (24 nuts)	8
Walnuts - 1/4 cup (14 halves)	3
Veggie burger - 1 patty	23
Tofu - 1/2 cup	11
Yogurt, plain - 1 cup	9
Whey protein powder - 1/3 cup	19

Source: *USDA National Nutrient Database for Standard Reference*

Tips to increase your protein intake

To include more high-quality protein in your diet, try replacing processed carbs with high-quality protein. It can reduce your risk for heart disease and stroke, and you'll also feel full longer, which can help you maintain a healthy weight.

- ▶ Reduce the amount of processed carbohydrates you consume—from foods such as pastries, cakes, pizza, cookies and chips—and replace them with fish, beans, nuts, seeds, peas, chicken, dairy, and soy and tofu products.
- ▶ Snack on nuts and seeds instead of chips, replace a baked dessert with Greek yogurt, or swap out slices of pizza for a grilled chicken breast and a side of beans.

Not a seafood fan? Make fish more palatable

If you're not a fan of seafood, but want to include more in your diet, there are ways to make fish more palatable.

- Always buy fresh fish. Some say tilapia, cod, or salmon have the least "fishy" taste.
- Disguise the taste by adding a flavorful sauce.
- Marinate fish with Creole or Cajun seasoning.

- Add shell fish or white fish, such as cod or tilapia, to a curry.
- Combine grilled fish with fresh salsa or your favorite chutney
- Mix canned salmon or tuna with low-fat mayonnaise and chopped onion for a tasty sandwich filling.

To avoid problems when increasing protein intake

- ▶ Choose unsalted nuts and seeds, to reduce your daily sodium intake.
- ▶ When shopping for canned beans, choose the low sodium versions.
- ▶ Adding more protein to your diet can increase urine output, so drink plenty of water to stay hydrated.
- ▶ Increasing protein can also cause calcium loss so make sure to [get plenty of calcium](/articles/healthy-eating/calcium-and-bone-health.htm) (1,000 to 1,200 mg per day).

Protein powders, shakes, and bars

In most cases, consuming the right balance of whole foods each day will provide you with all the nutrients you need, negating the need for protein supplements. However, you may benefit from supplementing your diet if you're:

- ▶ A teenager who is growing and exercising a lot
- ▶ An adult switching to a vegan diet—eliminating meat, chicken, fish, and even dairy and eggs from your diet
- ▶ An older adult with a small appetite who finds it difficult to eat your protein requirements in whole foods
- ▶ Starting or increasing a regular workout program, trying to add muscle, recovering from a sports injury, or find you feel weak while exercising or lifting weights

Using protein supplements

Protein supplements come in various forms including powders you mix with milk or water, pre-mixed, ready-to-drink shakes, or in bars. The most common types of protein used are whey, casein, and soy. Whey and casein are milk-based proteins, while soy is the better choice for vegans or anyone with a dairy allergy.

Safety concerns. Protein supplements may not be safe for older people with renal disease or people who have recently undergone surgery on the digestive system. Some ingredients may even interact with prescription medication, so check with your doctor or pharmacist before using.

Drink plenty of water to stay hydrated and make sure you're getting enough calcium in your diet.

Look out for extra ingredients. Many protein bars are packed with carbs and added sugar.

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