

What you really need to know about protein

By Teddi Nicolaus

Protein powders. Protein bars. Pasta with added protein. Even protein water and protein-enriched ice cream.

Protein is definitely having its moment in the spotlight. But before you shell out for a tub of protein powder or double down on steak, hit pause. The truth is you probably don't need extra protein at all.



PEAS



EGGS



LENTILS



CHEESE



BEANS

Amy Bragagnini, MS, RD, a spokesperson for the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, says many of her patients ask how they can get more protein.

"Truth be told, many of them are already consuming enough," Bragagnini says.

Protein plays a vital role in your body. It helps build and repair tissues. It supports muscle growth and maintenance.

It keeps fluids in balance and contributes to many biological processes that keep you functioning each day. Protein helps your body grow and stay strong.

But how much protein do you actually need?

The fact is the average American gets much more protein than they need each day without even trying. And if you're adding more, you may be getting too much.

Protein needs vary by your age, gender, health and activity level. A young athlete who trains daily will need more than someone who sits at a desk, for example.

Most adults need only 0.8 grams of protein per kilogram of body weight each day. For a 140-pound person, that would mean about 50 grams — equal to about a cup of Greek yogurt, a medium piece of chicken breast and a handful of almonds.

Too much protein often means too many calories overall, which can contribute to weight gain and raise the risk of heart disease and diabetes. Diets heavy in red and processed meats have been linked to colorectal cancer. Skimping on fiber in favor of protein can cause constipation and



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bloating. Extremely high protein intake may also strain kidneys and affect bone health.

There are some people who need more protein, however. Because muscle loss is common as we age, older adults need to up their intake — they should aim for about 1.2 grams of protein per kilogram of body weight a day. Muscle loss increases chances for falls and injuries, so preserving lean muscle mass as we get older is especially important.



WALNUT

Protein needs are higher for children too. For example, children ages 1 to 3 need about 13 grams a day, while teenage girls generally need about 46 grams, and teen boys, about 52 grams. Children with certain medical conditions may need more. Your child's health care team can provide sound, evidence-based guidance.

Again, the focus for kids should be on sufficient intake of whole foods, not on supplements like protein bars and shakes, which can add in sweeteners, artificial ingredients and extra calories they don't need.

Others who may need extra protein include people recovering from surgery, injury or burns, those who are pregnant or breastfeeding and people undergoing cancer treatment.

"My motto is: 'If a little is good, more is not necessarily better.' Consuming too much of anything is not necessarily safe," Bragagnini says.



SALMON

If you're unsure what's right for you, Bragagnini recommends consulting a registered dietitian to create a plan that's appropriate for your needs.

Food marketers might make it seem like every meal should revolve around protein, measured down to the gram. But obsessing over protein can crowd out the bigger picture, which is about balance. When you chase protein above all, especially through protein-fortified processed products, you may miss out on fiber, vitamins and other nutrients found in whole foods.

"Paying too much attention to the exact

number of grams of protein you consume could be unsafe," Bragagnini says.

Instead of counting every gram, she suggests following a steadier approach.

"First, become familiar with foods that have an ample amount of protein, such as lean meat, whole grains, beans and legumes, nuts, seeds, eggs and dairy, and make sure you have an adequate serving size at every meal."

In practical terms, make sure protein shows up regularly on your plate, but don't let it elbow out fruits, vegetables and whole grains.

And if you're generally healthy and eating balanced meals, you don't need that protein powder in your morning smoothie, either.

If you follow a vegan diet or avoid meat or dairy, you can still meet your protein needs with thoughtful planning. Tofu, peas, beans, lentils, nuts, seeds, fruits, vegetables and whole grains all contribute.

"Plant foods can absolutely provide enough protein," Bragagnini says. "The key is variety and balance."



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