



QuickBites Tip

How much protein do we need, and what are the best sources?

Although protein is an important part of a healthy diet, the truth is most Americans actually eat about twice as much protein as we need. Protein is a very important nutrient and is part of every cell in the body. Therefore, it is vital for the building and repair of the body's tissues.

Is it harmful to eat too much protein?

If someone is eating a high protein diet, their diet will be unbalanced and likely lacking in other important nutrients such as fiber, necessary vitamins and minerals, and disease fighting phytonutrients. High protein diets can make the kidneys work harder to process the extra nitrogen from the protein, and high protein diets can increase our risk for dehydration. In addition, some protein foods are high in calories and saturated fats, which can increase our risk for weight gain as well as developing diabetes or cardiovascular disease.

How much protein do we need?

The average, healthy adult requires about .8 grams of protein per kilogram of body weight. This means that a 120 pound person needs 44 grams/day, a 150 pound person needs 55 grams/day and a 190 pound person needs 69 grams/day. People who are ill, malnourished, elderly, athletes or are very active may require more to meet their needs. Pregnant or lactating women and children will also require more protein.

What foods are the best sources of protein?

The foods that contain the highest amounts of protein will come from animal sources – eggs, milk, cheese, beef, pork, poultry and fish. One 8-ounce cup of milk contains 8 grams, a medium-sized egg contain 5-7 grams, and a 3 ounce portion (approximately the size of a deck of cards) of meat, fish or poultry will contain approximately 21 grams. Plant foods also contain protein, but the amounts are generally lower depending upon the source. Examples of high protein plant foods include 2 tablespoons peanut butter containing 8 grams, ½ cup tofu containing 8 grams and ½ cup cooked, dried beans or lentils containing 7 grams.

Healthy diets that provide adequate amounts of protein can be built around vegetarian or non-vegetarian lifestyles, but some understanding of protein sources and a little planning are helpful to keep the diet healthy and balanced.

Non-vegetarians should try to choose lower fat sources of animal proteins and keep the portion sizes moderate. Vegetarians should be aware of complementary proteins and how to ensure they are getting the necessary amino acids and other nutrients to meet their nutritional needs. Next week the QuickBites topic will take a look at balanced & healthy vegetarian diets.

Try adding fish to your menu 1-2 times per week. It is a great source of lean protein and omega-3 fatty acids. Cooking fish in a foil pouch makes for a quick and easy weekday meal. The steam in the pouch keeps the fish moist and helps the flavors to blend. Choose 4-ounce portions of your favorite fish – salmon, halibut, bass, trout, tuna or whitefish. Preheat your oven to 400 degrees F (or use your grill). Cut the foil into approximately 12 inch squares. Arrange a pile of your favorite seasonal vegetables (broccoli, peppers, summer squash, tomatoes, onion, peas, greens, etc) in the center of the pouch and drizzle with olive oil, minced garlic and a dash of salt and pepper. Arrange 1 fish fillet portion on top of the vegetables and drizzle with fresh lemon juice. Then season the fillet with a drizzle of olive oil, a dash of salt and pepper, and your favorite dried or fresh herb blend, or Old Bay Seasoning. Wrap each square around the fish to form a sealed pouch. Transfer to baking sheet and bake 15-20 minutes until fish is flaky. Allow to cool for 5 minutes before opening and serving. Try adding a side of quinoa, which is a fast, tasty high protein grain source.

Want to learn more?

Sign up for Personal Nutrition Training with Curwin Gett, MA RDN LDN

Registered Dietitian Nutritionist, Licensed Dietitian

curwin@northfieldymca.org