

P NEW-LIFESTYLES STEPS TO A HEALTHIER YOUSM PROTEIN FACTS

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Many of today's popular diets for weight loss focus on lean sources of protein over carbohydrate consumption. Is it just a fad that one of the food nutrient groups, in this case-protein, has gained positive publicity over the others? To find out what all of the fuss is about, we need to learn more about protein and what it does for our bodies.

There's more to protein than just peanut butter. Many of the foods we eat contain protein. The best places in which to find protein are in fish, poultry, beef, dairy products, eggs, nuts and beans.

We often overhear people ordering a side of bacon or an egg with their stack of pancakes as they mutter to themselves that they "need some protein" in addition to carbohydrate meal choices. Why is protein now getting special attention? Do we know something more about protein now than we did in years past?

Protein's recent attention is most likely triggered by the surge in popularity of high-protein diets as a prescription for weight loss. Despite protein's place in the nutrition spotlight, in reviewing past research and literature, health experts realize that little is actually known about protein and its effect on health, as compared to

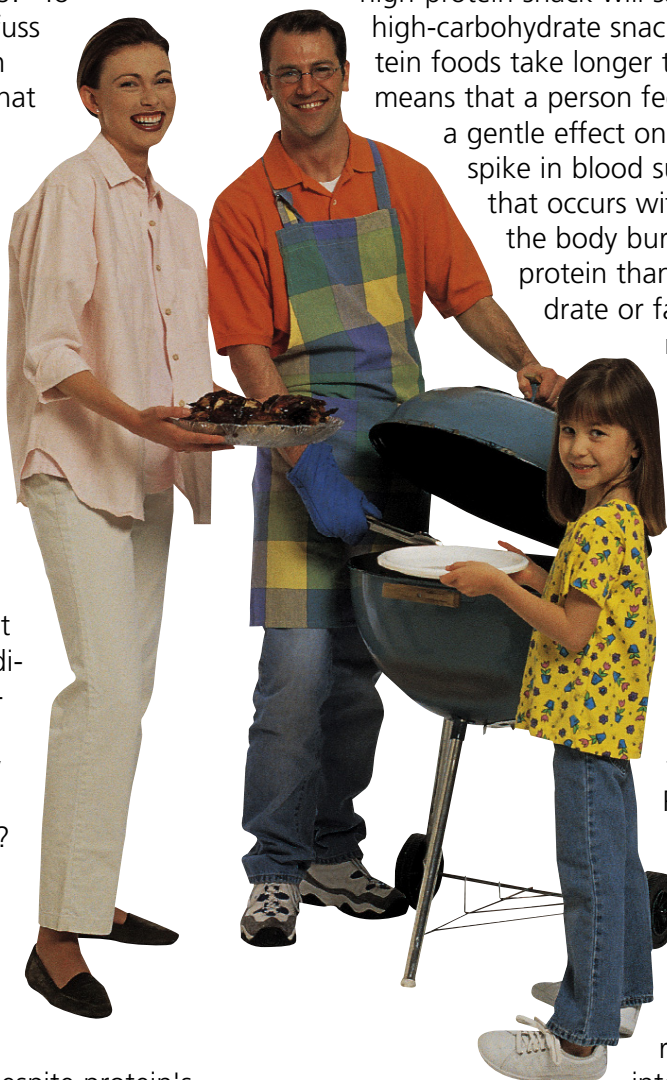
the other nutrients: carbohydrates, fat and alcohol.

Have we merely been conditioned by clever marketing to think of protein in a positive way?

Protein actually does have lasting power - meaning that a high-protein snack will satisfy appetites longer than a high-carbohydrate snack. This is because high-protein foods take longer to digest. Slower digestion means that a person feels full longer. Protein also has a gentle effect on blood sugar, instead of the spike in blood sugar (and subsequent crash) that occurs with some carbohydrates. Lastly, the body burns more calories digesting protein than it does digesting carbohydrate or fat. However, it is important to remember that excess protein is stored by the body as fat.

What is protein?

Protein is one of the four energy-containing food nutrients (the other three are carbohydrate, fat and alcohol). It is essential that we consume protein daily in order to build and maintain the tissues in our body. Protein makes up our muscles, organs, blood and even our immune system. Using the protein in the foods we eat, our body breaks this protein apart into its most basic form called amino acids and then reconfigures these amino acids into different strands, creating specialized protein molecules to accomplish specific jobs in the body. Each has a unique function whether it is to allow us to run or to make the hemoglobin in our red blood cells that carries oxygen to every part of our body.



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What are amino acids?

Proteins are often described as long necklaces strung with different kinds of beads. Each individual bead represents a tiny amino acid molecule. The body, through the process of digestion, breaks down protein into these basic amino acid molecules. There are two types of amino acids, essential and nonessential. Linked together in different combinations, amino acids have the ability to form thousands of different proteins. Twenty-two of these amino acid combinations are necessary to maintain our muscles, bones, blood, tissue and organs and to provide a base for hormones and antibodies--in essence they keep us alive and healthy.

Our body naturally makes 13 of the 22 amino acids. These are known as the nonessential amino acids. The other 9 amino acids come from the protein-rich foods we eat. These nine amino acids are referred to as essential amino acids because, as the name suggests, it is essential that we get them from our diet every day.

What is the difference between complete proteins, incomplete proteins and complementary proteins?

Complete proteins come from animal sources and contain all of the nine essential amino acids. Milk, eggs, fish, poultry, soybeans and meat are examples of complete proteins.

Incomplete proteins come from plant sources. Protein in vegetables, nuts, grains and beans is considered incomplete because it is missing at least one of the 9 essential amino acids. By eating a variety of foods that contain both types of protein, we can easily meet our body's protein needs.

Eating certain incomplete protein foods

in combination can give us all of the 9 essential amino acids, these are called complementary proteins. This is how vegetarians can fulfill the body's protein requirement. Some good examples typical to our diet include macaroni and cheese, pizza (bread and cheese), red beans and rice and a peanut butter sandwich. Complementary proteins don't even have to be eaten in the same meal. As long as they are consumed within the same 24-hour period, the body will take the essential amino acids it needs from each meal.

What is the current recommendation for protein in our diet?

It is generally recommended that kids need to eat about 0.5 grams of protein for every pound they weigh (or a gram of protein for every 2 pounds of body weight). For example, if a child weighs 70 pounds, they should consume 35 grams of protein each day. Adults need to consume 60 grams of protein per day. By eating a well-balanced diet, Americans don't have any trouble getting their recommended daily amount of protein.

Are we, as Americans, protein deficient?

Actually, unlike many around the world, Americans consume plenty of protein. In many undeveloped countries, people don't get enough protein and develop a condition called kwashiorkor. Kwashiorkor is a protein malnutrition that can cause loss of muscle mass, impair growth, weaken the immune system and, in some cases, cause death.

Is there such a thing as getting too much protein?

Yes, consuming too much protein can strip the body of much-needed calcium. The acids the body needs in order to digest protein are neutralized by calcium. So, the more protein we consume, the more calcium we need to balance out the resulting acid. This process can take a lot of calcium which gets taken away from bone and, as a result, can negatively affect bone strength. This is one of the reasons why some medical professionals caution against high-protein/low-carbohydrate diets, as studies have not yet revealed the potential long-term consequences of such diets.