

- Proteins—nutrition

Why is protein so important and how much do we need?

Bangor Mail · 28 Sep 2022 · 23

You don't need to be a nutrition expert to know protein is an essential component of a healthy diet.

From Atkins to keto, a variety of diets promote low-carb, protein-rich eating, but consuming too much can be detrimental. Here, experts explain everything you need to know about protein...

WHAT IS PROTEIN?

"Protein is a macronutrient, second only to water in the body's physical composition, and is essential for life," says Suzie Sawyer, clinical nutritionist from Aminoscience (nhco-nutrition.co.uk). "It is the primary component of hair, muscles, skin, eyes, and internal organs."

Our bodies need 20 amino acids, nine of which are essential because we can't physically produce them, so we get them from food sources.

"Protein exists in various amounts in foods, including beans, lentils, tofu, chicken, grains, meat, poultry, nuts and seeds," explains Lifesum (lifesum.com) nutritionist Signe Svanfeldt.

"Animal protein usually contains all nine essential amino acids and provides 'full protein value', while plant-based proteins rarely contain them all."

However, if you're vegan or vegetarian, you can reach the 'full protein value' by combining two or more plant-based protein sources, such as soy, beans and grains.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF PROTEIN?

Protein has multiple functions within the brain and body. "It's needed for the production of hormones and brain neurotransmitters," Suzie says. "For the maintenance and repair of body tissue, the production of antibodies in the immune system, for energy metabolism and to produce haemoglobin, which helps transport nutrients around the body."

It's particularly important for those in a growth phase of life, says Signe: "Such as children, teenagers or during pregnancy. The elderly also have an increased need for protein, in order to prevent muscle breakdown."

It's key for fuelling athletic performance and helps to regulate appetite, she adds: "A balanced meal with fibre, protein and healthy fats can also help us stay fuller for longer."

WHAT ARE THE DANGERS OF EATING TOO MUCH PROTEIN?

"When it comes to food and eating, balance is key – we should never eat only one macronutrient," Signe says. "If too much protein is consumed, you will not have room for the carbohydrates and fat your body needs."

Plus, loading up on, say, turkey breast and eggs without any carbs, limits your options in terms of energy: "Our bodies will use the protein as energy instead of using it for other tasks, such as cell growth."

WHAT HAPPENS IF YOU EAT A SURPLUS?

"Any excess is excreted via urine," Suzie says. "Long-term excessively high protein intake may cause issues with the kidneys and it can increase the rate of calcium loss, which is a factor for women and bone health during the menopause." "I see more cases of protein deficiency in my clinical practice than anything else, which causes many health issues, especially the muscle wasting disease, sarcopenia." The good news, though, is that most people are unlikely to be eating an excessive amount,

HOW MUCH PROTEIN SHOULD YOU AIM TO EAT?

The amount of protein required depends on your weight. "A general recommendation is that 0.8g of protein per kg body weight is an adequate amount of protein daily for a healthy adult," Signe explains. "Although, if you workout a lot, aim to lose weight or are elderly, you have an increased protein need and require around 1.2 to 2.0g of protein per kg body weight." It's best to spread your intake through the day, Suzie says: "It's important to eat protein at every meal – this is essential for metabolic balance. If you are vegan, then you will need to balance food intake to ensure sufficient essential amino acids are consumed, i.e. rice and beans."