- Proteins—nutrition

30 DAYS TO Increase Your Protein

Can you have too much protein?

Words: The Renee McGregor Clinic

We've covered how to get enough protein, but can you have too much of a good thing? We dig deeper and separate the myths from the facts

Current recommendations suggest consuming at least 0.75g of protein per kilogram of bodyweight daily (for example, 52.5g protein for a 70kg person). While there's no established absolute maximum, research indicates we don't gain additional benefits beyond 2g of protein per kilogram daily (that's approximately 120g of protein for a 70kg person).

The potential risks of getting too much protein

The main concern if your diet is very protein focused is that it will most probably be deficient in certain micronutrients and fibre, due to lacking diversity. A diet that is excessively high in protein can lead to indigestion nausea, as the body can struggle to digest it efficiently. Additionally, there can be a risk of dehydration in ultra-high protein diets as the body uses more water in the digestion of protein in comparison to carbohydrates and fats. If the main source of protein in someone's high-protein diet is fatty red meat or processed meat, then there could be an increased risk of heart disease, certain cancers, and diabetes due to the high saturated fat and salt content.

There are many reasons why you could have the following symptoms, but if you know your diet is very high in protein and you are feeling lethargic, struggling with digestion and are dehydrated, you may want to consider reducing your protein intake or spacing out and changing the sources of protein.

Diversifying protein intake

Not all protein is created equal. Proteins are 3D structures composed of molecules called amino acids. Their sequence and resulting shape determine the type of protein created. Our bodies need 20 different amino acids to build the thousands of proteins required for the human body to function. Eleven of these are 'non-essential' amino acids, which the body can create itself. There are also nine 'essential' amino acids, and these we must source from our diet. When a food is referred to as being a 'complete protein' this means it contains all nine essential amino acids. All animal products are complete proteins, and so are some plant-based proteins like soya products, quinoa, buckwheat, chia and hemp. Often, people will opt for animal proteins over plant-based proteins as they think they are superior. However, by protein pairing (nuts with grains, seeds with lentils, etc) plant-based options can ensure your meal is a complete protein.

Try incorporating a variety of protein sources, as each offers unique health benefits:

– **Red meat:** Rich in vitamin B12 for energy production.
– **Live yoghurt:** Contains beneficial bacteria for gut health.
– **Fortified soya milk:** Excellent source of bone-strengthening calcium.
– **Beans and lentils:** Packed with heart-healthy fibre.
– **Oily fish, such as salmon:** Contains omega-3s for brain health and function.

Optimising protein timing

Earlier research suggested we couldn't absorb more than 30g of protein at once, but newer studies indicate the range might be 20-40g depending on size, muscle mass, activity level, protein type, and hydration status. However, it is recommended that 'protein pulsing' – consuming protein regularly throughout the day in meals and snacks – is more effective for reaching protein goals than concentrating intake in a single meal or shake.

Protein muscle synthesis is most efficient within 20 minutes post-exercise, which is why post-workout protein consumption is strongly advised. For optimal recovery, aim for a 3:1 carbohydrate-to-protein ratio after workouts.

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Myth VS FACT

"Protein is the most important macronutrient in sport."

Protein plays a vital role in muscle repair and growth. However, it is just as important that it is consumed alongside carbohydrate so that the body has enough energy to break down the proteins and rebuild them into different proteins that the body needs, such as muscle cells, hormones and enzymes.

"High-protein diets lead to weak bones."

Due to protein intake increasing the rate that calcium is lost in the urine, it was once thought that a high-protein diet could lead to weak bones. However, current research suggests that there is no direct negative impact on bone health or higher risk of osteoporosis from a high-protein diet.

"A high-protein diet can cause kidney damage."

A healthy human body is pretty tolerant of a high-protein diet. However, if you already have any condition that affects your kidneys, it might be advised that you do not consume a high-protein diet.

"You can't have a high-protein vegetarian diet."

While an omnivore diet might make it easier to hit your protein needs, it is still very achievable with a plant-based diet. Ensuring that your diet includes beans, lentils, pulses, nuts, seeds, tofu, edamame beans, quinoa, eggs, dairy and so on, means you will hit your protein requirements.



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