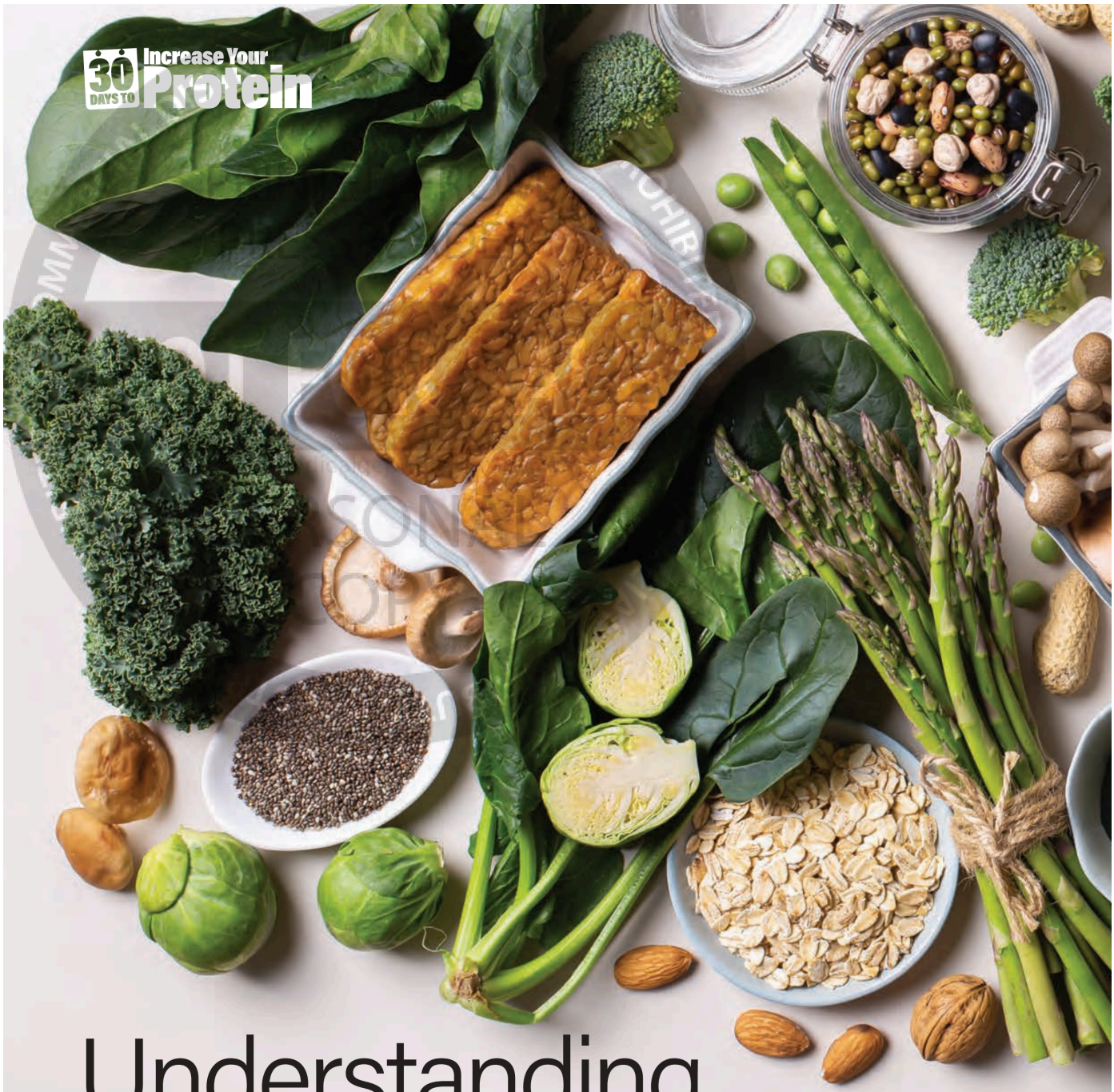
- Proteins—nutrition



Understanding plant-based protein

The notion that we don't get enough protein with a plant-based diet is a myth – here's what the science says

Words: Rob Hobson

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Let's just start by saying, yes, you can get enough protein on a plant-based diet. No, you don't need to chuck back soy protein shakes every day or combine your beans and lentils with military precision. There's still a lot of confusion out there, but the science is clear: if you know what you're doing, plant-based diets can deliver all the protein your body needs.

Complete vs incomplete

The term 'complete protein' refers to foods that contain all nine essential amino acids in the right ratios your body needs. Animal-based proteins like meat, fish, eggs, and dairy tick this box, while most plant-based sources don't. It's a misconception that 'incomplete' proteins do not contain the essential amino acids of their animal counterparts, but simply that they are lower in one or more of them. This also doesn't mean that they're useless or inferior.

If you're eating a balanced, varied diet throughout the day, which could be oats in the morning, beans at lunch, and tofu at dinner, then you're already getting a good mix of amino acids from different plant proteins. This idea of combining proteins, known as complementary proteins, used to be something people thought they had to do at every meal, but we now know it's fine to spread it out across the day.

One of the big perks of plant proteins is that they often come bundled with fibre, vitamins, minerals and antioxidant plant compounds like polyphenols, which is another great reason for omnivores to mix things up and use more plant-based options.

How much protein can a plant-based diet provide?

The UK Reference Nutrient Intake (RNI) for protein is 0.75g per kilogram of body weight per day, so someone weighing 70kg would need around 52g daily. But it's important to remember that this is a *minimum* to prevent deficiency and not necessarily the optimal amount for everyone. If you're going through menopause, are physically active, or getting older, your needs are likely to be higher. In fact, research suggests that aiming for

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30 DAYS TO Increase Your Protein

6 GREAT SOURCES OF *plant-based protein*

Looking to boost your protein on a plant-based diet? These six foods deliver a solid protein hit – alongside fibre, minerals and antioxidants.

Lentils
(COOKED – 200G)

Cheap, filling, and very versatile in soups, curries and salads.



Tofu
(FIRM – 200G)

Complete protein source and great for stir-fries, scrambles or broths.



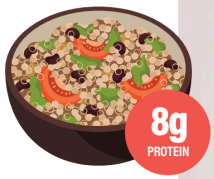
Chickpeas
(COOKED – 200G)

Use in curries, stews, falafel or roasted as a crunchy topping.



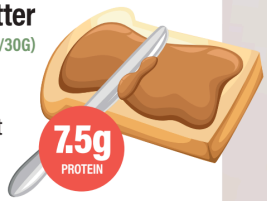
Quinoa
(COOKED – 180G)

Complete protein that doubles as a grain substitute with extra benefits.



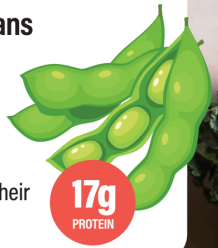
Peanut butter
(SMOOTH – 2 TBSP/30G)

Great on toast, porridge, or in smoothies, but go easy on the portion size.



Edamame beans
(SHELLED – 150G)

These little green gems are protein powerhouses you can add to salads, bowls or enjoy on their own with sea salt.



1.2-2g per kilo of bodyweight can better support muscle maintenance, recovery, and overall health. If you're overweight, protein should be calculated based on your ideal or target weight rather than actual weight, to avoid overshooting what your body really needs.

Plant-based protein sources sometimes contain less protein per gram than animal-based options, which means you may need to eat slightly more overall to hit targets. Again, that's not difficult when you build meals around soy, nuts, seeds, legumes, grains and vegetables.

Do plant-based diets leave you deficient in protein?

One of the most persistent myths about plant-based diets is that they leave you protein deficient. But studies show that vegans and vegetarians in high-income countries like the UK typically meet (or exceed) their daily protein needs. Even athletes can thrive on a plant-based diet. A study published in the Journal of Sport Nutrition and Exercise Metabolism (2016) showed that strength and muscle gains in plant-based athletes were equivalent to their omnivorous peers when protein intake was matched. The key is total daily intake and variety, not whether the protein came from a cow or a chickpea.

Do you need to use a protein powder?

If you're eating enough overall and getting a good variety of plant-based foods, you probably don't need a protein supplement. That said, there are times when it can be useful. If your protein needs are higher, say you're training regularly, recovering from illness or surgery, or following a more restrictive diet, then a plant-based protein powder can help top things up. Go for one that blends different plant proteins to provide a better mix of amino acids. And if you're using it post-workout, check that it delivers 2-3g of leucine, as this is the key amino acid that helps trigger muscle protein synthesis.

Supplements can also be convenient. I often recommend them for clients who train first thing in the morning and need a fast post-workout option, or those who are struggling with appetite (say, due to medication or age) and can't manage larger meals. This is often the case with those taking GLP-1 receptor agonists who can drink a small serving to help top up their daily protein intake.

If you are competing in sports then always choose a product tested for safety (Informed Sport certified) and try to find a product that has minimal additives or sweeteners.

Protein planning tips

– **Include a protein source at each meal** such as tofu, lentils, beans, tempeh or Quorn.
– **Don't forget about higher-protein whole grains** such as buckwheat, quinoa and amaranth.
– **Use fortified plant milks** and yoghurts and opt for soy as it contains similar protein levels to dairy (oat and nut milk are much lower in protein).
– **Think of vegetables as contributors too** as greens like broccoli and spinach all contain a few grams per serving. Peas are a better source at over 5g per 100g serving.
– **Snack smart:** roasted chickpeas, edamame, houmous, or a protein shake if needed.

Getting enough protein on a plant-based diet isn't as hard as people think. If you're eating a mix of whole foods across the day you should cover your bases. You don't need to obsess over combining foods or load up on shakes unless your needs are higher. It's about variety, balance and consistency. Plant-based diets aren't just about hitting a protein target as they bring fibre, antioxidants and a whole range of nutrients to the table as well, which is why they're a solid foundation for long-term health.

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