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A certain macronutrient is receiving mega love these days, and experts say some people should consume even more.

But is it possible to have too much of a good thing?

WELCOME TO

PROTEIN-PALOOZA!

BY KAREN ANSEL, R.D.N.



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OLIVER BURSTON-SPOOKY POOKY.

Lately it seems as if everyone is **obsessed** with protein.

“The biggest driver of protein’s soaring popularity is its potential to support weight loss and build muscle,”

Paleo and keto diets are all the rage, and the Pure Change program (celeb model Bella Hadid swears by it) has gone viral on social media. “For some time now, protein has been the golden child of the nutrition world,” says *New York Times* best-selling author Joy Bauer, R.D.N., C.D.N. The International Food Information Council’s 2024 Food & Health Survey indicated that 71% of Americans were trying to eat more of it—that’s a big leap from 59% in 2022. In fact, a greater chunk of us are trying to eat more protein than is the case for any other nutrient, including those we don’t get enough of—digestion-friendly fiber, bone-strengthening calcium, and the iron we need for energy. Some protein prioritizers (not just influencers, but doctors too) recommend eating at least double the amount of protein health experts generally recommend.

As a result, “we’re sometimes going to unusual extremes to get it, like eating chips made from chicken breast, topping salads with protein-laced dressing, spooning protein powder into coffee, and even drinking protein-infused beer,” says Bauer.

says Dawn Jackson Blatner, R.D.N., author of *The Superfood Swap*. But that’s not all: In addition to its proven ability to build muscle and help with weight loss by promoting fullness and slightly boosting metabolism, protein supports more balanced blood sugar levels. And even though there’s little if any evidence to support these assertions, some say it will help you grow more lustrous hair and nails, sleep more soundly, detox your body, and ease menopausal hormone fluctuations.

With all these protein claims in the news, it’s easy to assume we need to up our intake. But the typical American adult downs roughly 80 g of protein daily, more than enough by the standards of the National Academy of Medicine. It states that most healthy adults require 0.36 g of protein per pound of body weight per day. That’s roughly 61 g for a 170-pound woman and 72 g for a 200-pound man.

Yet it may not be quite so cut-and-dried: Some experts say the standards need to be updated based on new research and that depending on your lifestyle, health needs, and age, you



MARTHA PAVLIDOU/WEARESTUDIO33.COM.

actually might need quite a bit more protein than the current recommendation. It also matters when and how you are taking in protein and what kinds.

In short, it's complicated! But before you toss those pricey chicken chips into your shopping cart, here are the answers to your questions.

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Q: What does protein actually do for the body?

■ At the most basic level, our bodies need protein to build muscle, skin, and bones and provide the raw material for synthesis of enzymes, hormones, and antibodies. When you eat a piece of chicken or a handful of edamame, your body breaks the protein down into tiny parts called amino acids. It then rearranges the amino acids and links them together to create the specific proteins it needs to function at a given moment.

And while, yes, protein builds muscle, that's only half the story. Protein provides the amino acids the body needs to repair and maintain muscle, but without a stimulus such as resistance training, it won't miraculously add muscle. For that, you'll need to hit the weights *and* eat more protein (about double the recommended amount) to keep your body strong and healthy.

Q: Does protein help you lose weight?

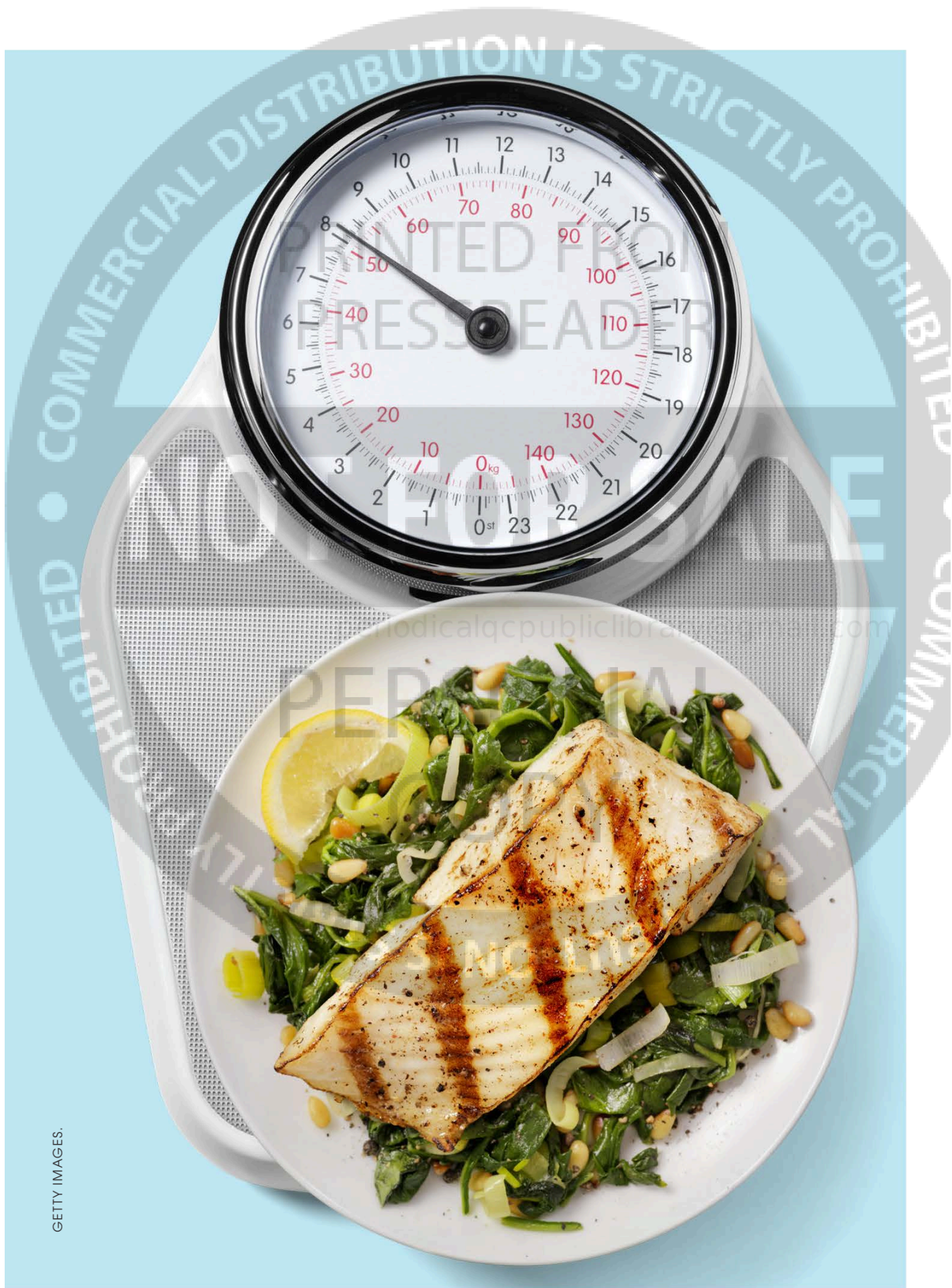
■ There is good evidence that a protein-rich diet helps with weight management. "Protein takes longer to digest than carbs, so it's more satiating,"

says Bauer. "It also helps slow the absorption of carbs and sugar into the bloodstream, so it can blunt some of the blood sugar spikes." And there's more: "Protein takes more calories to break down and store than fat or carbohydrates," says Richard Kreider, Ph.D., director of the Exercise & Sport Nutrition Lab at Texas A&M University. "That's why higher-protein diets seem to be a little more efficacious for weight loss than higher-carb or -fat diets."

But bear in mind that certain forms of protein are heart-unfriendly because of their saturated fat: "Processed meats, red meat, and high-fat dairy may negatively impact heart-health markers like cholesterol," says Blatner. "When it comes to animal proteins, fish and poultry are better choices, as they're lower in saturated fat. Plus, fish contains omega-3 fatty acids, which support heart health." Beans and lentils, in which protein is packaged as part of a heart-healthy cocktail of phytonutrients and fiber, are great options.

Q: Do some people need more protein than others?

■ Protein needs aren't one-size-fits-all. Your needs may differ from the recommended 0.36 g of protein per pound of body weight per day if you fall into one of the following groups:



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Athletes and active people

“If you don’t do any physical activity, the current recommendations are probably OK,” says Kreider. “But if you are active and don’t eat enough protein, where does the body go to get that protein? It breaks down its own muscle.” To maintain the muscle you’ve built, you’ll need more like two to two and a half times the official recommendation, according to the International Society of

Sports Nutrition, which means 108 g to 154 g for a 170-pound woman and 127 g to 181 g for a 200-pound man.

Menopausal women

Protein won’t magically ease menopausal symptoms, but it may help reverse menopause-related changes in body composition. Here’s why: During perimenopause and into menopause, dwindling estrogen levels promote the breakdown

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of lean muscle tissue, resulting in a loss of nearly half a pound of lean mass per year. With less muscle on board, metabolism starts to decline, and fat storage increases. While there's not enough research to say for sure how much protein premenopausal and postmenopausal women should aim to get, one study proposed that bumping up protein intake to 18% to 20% of daily calories while decreasing carbs and fat by 250 calories per day might favor maintenance of lean muscle and protect against menopause-related gains in body fat. Putting that into practice can be as simple as upping the size of your grilled chicken breast from 3 oz to 5 oz and losing half a bagel and a tablespoon of oil or butter.

People older than 65

As we age, our bodies don't digest protein as efficiently as they used to, says Kreider, and we shed muscle. This process begins as early as our 30s, and by age 65 it accelerates considerably, translating to a loss of roughly 8% of total muscle mass per decade. But you can take preventive measures. A 2022 meta-analysis of 22 studies found that people 60 and older who exceeded standard protein recommendations walked faster and had stronger muscles and better balance. Protein isn't just about muscle, though: Greater intake is also associated with less cognitive decline. According to many experts, a good goal for older folks is roughly 0.5 g for each pound of weight.

People taking GLP-1 meds

"When people go on low-calorie diets that don't have enough protein, a lot of the weight they lose is muscle, needed to supply essential amino acids for vital roles in the body," says Kreider. Protein becomes even more critical if you're taking a GLP-1 receptor agonist like Ozempic or Wegovy. That's why a 2024 multicenter study published in the journal *Obesity* recommends that anyone taking these medications bump up their protein to as much as 0.68 g per pound of body weight.

Q: Can vegetarians and vegans get enough protein?

■ It is definitely possible to get plenty of protein from plants, eggs, and dairy (if you consume animal products), but it takes a little extra effort, says Blatner. There are nine essential amino acids our bodies need but are unable to create on their own, and the only foods that provide them in one complete package are animal foods, soy, and certain grains. Still, "eating a wide variety of plant-based proteins can ensure that you get all the amino acids you need," says Blatner. That means that in addition to consuming whole-soy products such as tofu, edamame, and soy milk, vegetarians and vegans should eat

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plenty of beans, lentils, chickpeas, nuts, seeds, and whole grains with protein.

Q ■ Should you supplement?

■ It might be tempting to just dump a couple of scoops of protein powder into your smoothie, but that's not the best

everyday strategy, experts say. "Optimal protein consumption isn't just about a macro percentage or the number of grams you eat in a day; it's also about quality, quantity, and distribution," says Leslie Bonci, M.P.H., R.D.N., owner of Active Eating Advice. Protein from whole foods delivers a powerful mix of nutrients no powder can match—and it doesn't come packaged with sweeteners and other additives.

Instead of leaning on a powder, think



JOE LINGEMAN; FOOD STYLING BY MAGGIE RUGGIERO.

about the types of protein you are getting at different meals, and know that timing is key. Since we don't store protein the same way we do carbohydrates and fats, the body needs to get it regularly throughout the day, says Blatner. "This not only supports muscle protein synthesis but also helps with satiety and overall energy levels," she adds. A good goal is 20 g to 30 g of protein per meal. As for the much-hyped collagen powder, Bonci advises not relying on it. "Collagen is a poor-quality protein, as it's very low in leucine, the amino acid most involved in muscle-protein synthesis," she says. "So collagen is not a one-for-one trade for other higher-quality proteins."

In the end, health experts agree that while in a pinch it's fine to eat a protein bar or drink a power smoothie and that protein powders can enhance your diet, getting your protein from whole foods is best. Beef, pork, chicken, turkey, fish, dairy, and eggs are all rich in complete protein. "I really like dairy foods because they're easy," says Bonci. Pour some cow's milk on your cereal, munch on ricotta toast, snack on cottage cheese with berries, or top a bowl of pasta with a generous handful of shredded part-skim mozzarella. "I'm a huge fan of Greek yogurt," says Bauer, a nutrition consultant for Chobani. "It's loaded with high-quality protein. Plus, it's incredibly versatile. I use it in any place I would usually use sour cream, like as a topping for tacos, baked potatoes, and enchiladas."

Q Is there such a thing as eating too much protein?

Unless you have a kidney condition, you can't really overdose on protein, says Chris Mohr, Ph.D., R.D., a sports nutritionist in Louisville, KY. And generally speaking, most protein experts agree that while data suggests that people eat "enough," meaning they meet the minimum requirements, optimal intakes would be a bit higher than the average. But that's not to say that blindly adding more is better; the real risk is overconsuming one nutrient at the expense of others. Though protein can do good things for your body, if you eat too much of it, that leaves less room for other healthy foods such as fruits, whole grains, vegetables, and healthy fats, all of which perform important functions in the body. Considering that these items offer a package of nutrients to keep your body strong and vital and reduce your risk of chronic diseases like cancer, heart disease, and type 2 diabetes, they deserve a costarring role on your plate.



Looking for yummy high-protein snacks? Well, here you go: prevention.com/healthy-protein-snacks