- Proteins

5 health risks from consuming too much protein

Most Americans eat more protein than they need. We asked experts what can happen if people have too much of a good thing

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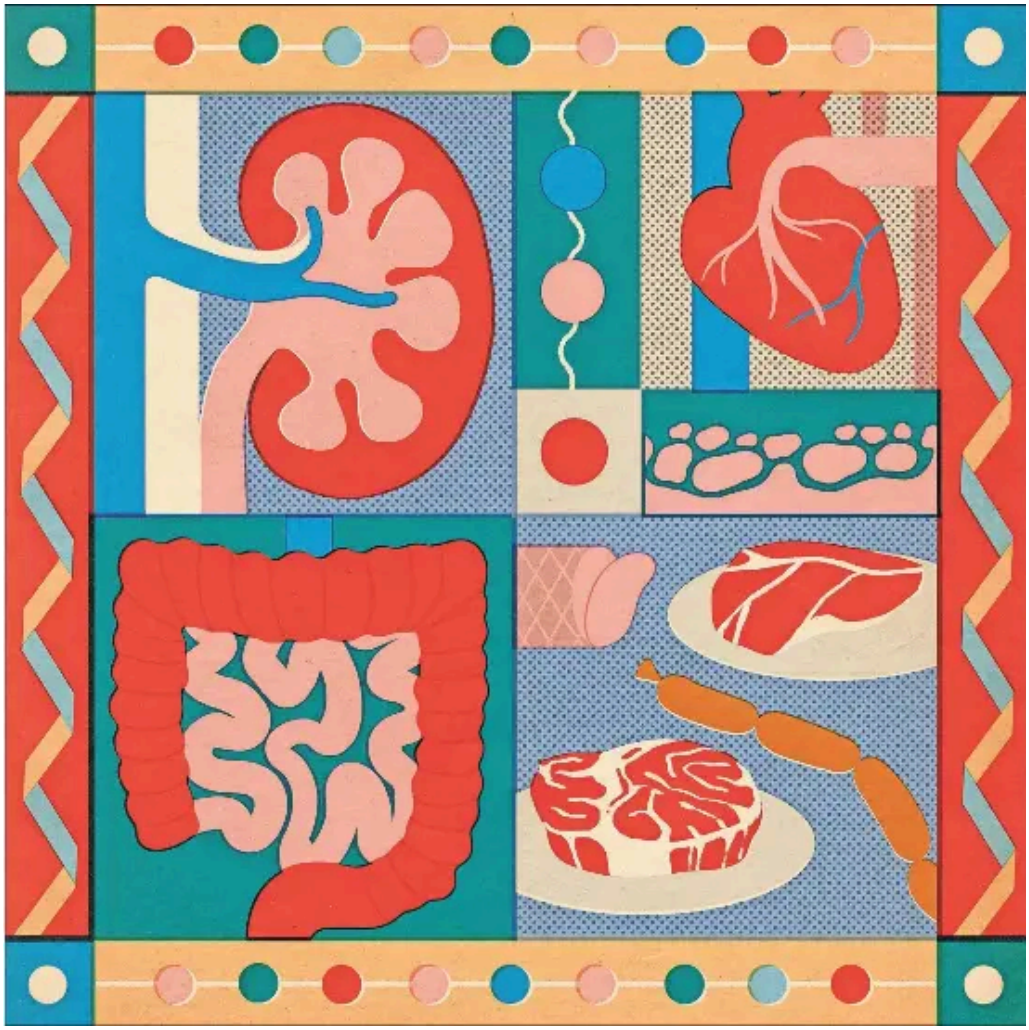
If you've browsed the packaged-food aisle of a grocery store lately, or scanned the updated Dietary Guidelines for Americans, you might think that when it comes to protein, more is better.



Packaged cereal, popcorn, pancake mix and coffee drinks are being infused with the nutrient. And the new inverted food pyramid, released by the Trump administration in January, features protein prominently, with steak, chicken and cheese at the top.

Research suggests that most US adults are eating far more protein than is needed for good health. And according to a 2025 survey of 3,000 US adults, 71 per cent said they were trying to eat more — up from 59 per cent in 2022.

Protein is an essential nutrient. But more is not necessarily better, said Bettina Mittendorfer, a professor of nutrition and exercise physiology at the University of Missouri School of Medicine. And in some cases, eating much more than what nutrition experts recommend can come with some risks.

There isn't a strict rule for how much protein is too much, experts say, and many people can exceed recommended amounts with no issues. But potential problems can arise when people eat much more than around 1.2 grams of protein per kilogramme of body weight per day, Mittendorfer said. Here are some of those concerns.

Most of the protein that Americans eat comes from meat and other animal products. In one study published in 2021, researchers from the Department of Agriculture found that animal foods (including beef, chicken and cured meat) accounted for nearly 70 per cent of people's protein consumption.

Research suggests that those who eat larger amounts of red and processed meat tend to have higher risks of heart disease and Type 2 diabetes, said Dr Donald Hensrud, an associate professor of nutrition and preventive medicine at the Mayo Clinic College of Medicine.

In one large analysis published in 2023, for instance, researchers found that eating an extra 100 grams of red meat (equivalent to about one thin, boneless pork chop) per day increased the risk of heart disease by 11 per cent — and every additional 50 grams of processed red meat (equivalent to about one standard hot dog) per day increased it by 26 per cent. Another study, also published in 2023, found that among the nearly 217,000 (mostly female) participants, those who ate the most red meat had a 40 per cent higher risk of developing Type 2 diabetes than those who ate the least, and that those who ate the most processed red meat had a 51 per cent higher risk.

Red and processed meats tend to contain high levels of saturated fats, which can raise blood levels of LDL (or "bad") cholesterol and increase the risk of heart attack and stroke. These foods may also increase inflammation and insulin resistance, Hensrud said, which could raise the risks of heart disease and Type 2 diabetes as well.

Consuming excess red and processed meat could also increase the risk of cancer, especially colorectal cancer, Hensrud said.

In one study published in 2024, researchers found that diets high in red meat were linked with a 30 per cent increased risk of developing colorectal cancer, and that those high in processed meat were linked with a 40 per cent increase in risk.

Dr Dariush Mozaffarian, a cardiologist and director of the Food Is Medicine Institute at Tufts University, said that plant sources of protein such as soy, lentils, beans and nuts — as well as fish and fermented dairy products like yogurt — were much healthier options.

People who prioritize vegetables, fruits and whole grains, along with lean or plant-based proteins, are less likely to develop certain types of cancer (as well as cardiovascular disease and Type 2 diabetes).

People who are focused on increasing their protein consumption (especially those on low-carb diets) sometimes inadvertently leave out high-fiber foods, like vegetables and whole grains, said Marc O'meara, a nutritionist at Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston.

Fiber is essential for keeping your intestines and gut microbiome healthy, he said. It helps keep your bowel movements regular and serves as food for your gut microbes. Diets higher in fiber can also reduce the likelihood of developing certain gut disorders, like irritable bowel syndrome, he said.

O'meara recommended aiming for equal portions of vegetables, protein and whole grains at most meals. Or, if you're trying to limit calories to lose weight, he said, make half of the plate vegetables

and a quarter each protein and whole grains.

A popular claim on social media is that you must follow a high-protein diet if you want to lose weight or gain muscle. But if you're not doing enough strength training or other exercise to match your increased protein consumption, Mozaffarian said, any excess calories, including those from protein, will be turned into fat.

O'meara also noted that favouring protein-rich foods over vegetables could lead to weight gain. A half-cup of cooked vegetables, for instance, has an average of about 25 calories, whereas a halfcup of cooked chicken has about 140 calories, he said. If you triple a serving of chicken to eat more protein, you consume five to six times as many calories as you will if you triple a serving of vegetables, O'meara said.

If your kidneys are healthy, you probably don't need to worry much about excess protein consumption, Hensrud said. However, for the more than one in seven Americans with chronic kidney disease — especially those who may be close to needing dialysis — metabolising large amounts of protein can stress the kidneys, Hensrud said, further reducing kidney function.

Kidney stones are also a potential side effect of consuming too much animal protein, Hensrud said. If you drink enough water, however, your risk is far lower.