- Proteins—nutrition

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THE POWER OF PROTEIN

Words: Kate Percy

If strength had a best friend, it would be protein. Here's why this special macronutrient is your new best friend







Protein is essential for building and maintaining muscle, but its benefits go far beyond that. It plays a vital role in your immune system, hormones, enzymes, skin, hair and nails. It helps you recover from illness or injury, keeps you feeling fuller for longer, and even stabilises blood sugar levels; especially helpful at breakfast to stay energised and balanced all morning.

Protein matters as you age

Protein becomes even more important as we get older. From about age 30, we naturally start to lose muscle mass, a process that accelerates in our 40s, 50s and beyond. This loss can lead to weakness, fatigue and a higher risk of falls. Yet many midlife adults, especially women, aren't eating enough protein to prevent it.

The current UK guideline is just 0.75g per kg of body weight per day. That's about 45g for a 60kg woman, but this is the bare minimum to prevent deficiency in sedentary individuals. For healthy ageing and maintaining strength, newer research suggests older adults may need 1.2-1.5g per kg, or 72-90g of protein daily for that same woman. For those who are active or training, 1.4-2g/kg is recommended by the International Society of Sports Nutrition.

It's not just for 'gym bunnies'

According to *The Grocer*, protein consumption rose in 2024, not just among athletes, but among people seeking better energy, strength and general health. Yet many people don't know when or how to get enough protein, or what kind really counts.

Part of a bigger picture

While protein is vital, it works best as part of a balanced diet that includes all three macronutrients: protein, carbohydrates and fats, and in fact many foods contain a mixture of two or even all three of these.

Carbohydrates are your body's go-to fuel and especially important before, during and after exercise. They power your workouts and also help

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protein do its job in muscle recovery. Without enough carbs, your body may burn protein for energy instead of using it to build muscle. Great sources include wholegrains, root veg, beans, lentils, fruit and vegetables.

Fats support hormone health, reduce inflammation, and help absorption of vitamins. Prioritise healthy unsaturated fats, such as olive oil, nuts, seeds and oily fish.

Don't save it all for dinner!

The official guidance is to eat only 25-30g protein at any one time. Protein tolerance varies individually, so some may be able to absorb more. However, excessive protein intake can lead to digestive discomfort, dehydration, and affect kidney function. To maximise muscle repair and strength, aim for smaller amounts every 3-4 hours throughout the day.

Here's a sample day:

Breakfast: Greek yoghurt with berries and seeds (20g).
Lunch: Lentil and feta salad (25g).
Snack: Boiled eggs or houmous with oatcakes (10-15g).
Dinner: Salmon, quinoa, broccoli (30g).

After a workout, try to include some protein in your next meal or snack, but don't stress over exact timings. The window for muscle repair lasts up to 24 hours, so what matters most is total daily intake.

Quality counts

You've probably heard of 'complete' versus 'incomplete' proteins. It's true that animal-based sources of protein (such as chicken, fish, eggs and dairy) tend to have all nine essential amino acids in the right ratios – complete proteins. A few plant-based foods, such as tofu and quinoa, are also complete proteins, but the majority are incomplete and so lack certain essential amino acids. Some of the best protein sources include:

Animal: Eggs, Greek yoghurt, turkey, chicken, fish, cottage cheese, beef, milk.
Plant: Lentils, tofu, tempeh, quinoa, butter beans, chickpeas, nuts, seeds.

If you follow a plant-based diet you absolutely can get enough high-quality protein. A top tip is to pair plant proteins to create a complete protein source. Good pairings are grains with legumes, for instance brown rice and beans, nut butter on wholegrain toast, houmous with oatcakes and tofu stir-fry with buckwheat noodles.

Plant-based proteins also offer fibre, antioxidants and gut-friendly nutrients, making them a great choice even if you're not vegetarian.

Choose real food first

Whole foods provide more than protein – they come with vitamins, minerals, antioxidants, healthy fats and fibre. They're more satisfying, gut-friendly, better for digestion and help build healthy eating habits. That said, protein powders, bars and drinks can help now and then, especially after exercise, on busy days, or if you're struggling to eat enough. In 2024, sales of these products surged by 24.2 per cent, totalling more than £225 million, but they should be a backup, not a base, for protein intake.

Top tip: Always check the ingredients. Watch for added sugars, sweeteners, and things you wouldn't find in your own kitchen. If you use a bar or shake, pair it with something fresh, such as fruit or a handful of nuts.

How much do you need?

A simple rule of thumb is to get a palm-size portion of protein with every meal. That could be:

– Two eggs.
– A fillet of salmon.
– Half a cup of cooked lentils.
– A small chicken breast.
– A block of tofu or tempeh.

In short, protein is crucial for strength, energy and ageing well. Combine protein-rich foods with ones containing carbs and fats, and spread your intake across the day, prioritising whole foods. Don't underestimate your needs, especially if you're over 40 or very active. Your muscles, and your future self, will thank you.



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