The Importance of Protein in Your Diet

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Protein and Osteoporosis

Proteins help to reproduce, form, and repair every cell within your body, as well as boosting your immune system and keeping your bones strong. They also help to regulate fluid balance and keep your liver healthy by removing ammonia, a waste product your body produces.

Specialized proteins, called lipoproteins, transport fats, which are needed for energy. Proteins bind with fat-soluble vitamins to ensure that they are available to perform a wide array of functions.

What Are Proteins?

Proteins are nutrients made up of compounds called amino acids. The amino acids form chains, which create protein. There are 20 different kinds of amino acids, and your body manufactures 11 of these. The remaining nine kinds of amino acids must be consumed in your diet.

Protein and Osteoporosis

It was traditionally thought that eating high amounts of protein might cause calcium to leach from bones. Newer research disputes this, and most experts now believe that additional protein protects bones.

Since protein is a major component in the structure of bones, if you have or are at risk for developing osteoporosis, protein should be a priority in your diet. If you have a history of fractures, you need extra protein for enhancing bone strength and repair of the broken bones.

How Much Protein Do I Need?

Consuming adequate amounts of protein enhances the likelihood that you will have strong bones later in life. Teenage girls and women require about 46 grams of protein each day, which is equivalent to five ounces of a protein food each day. Pregnant women need more protein than other people — 71 grams or approximately eight ounces of a protein food is needed each day during pregnancy.

Protein should account for between 10–35% percent of your caloric intake daily. If you engage in regular moderate to vigorous exercise for more than 30 minutes each day, you may need to ingest more than this.

What Is a Serving of Protein?

One ounce of lean cooked meat, fish or poultry contains one ounce of protein, as does one egg, one ounce of nuts or seeds, or a quarter cup of tofu or cooked dried peas, beans, or lentils. A tablespoonful of peanut or other nut butter is also equal to one ounce of protein.

When determining how much protein you need in your diet, you do not need to focus on consuming the total recommended amount from the high-protein foods listed above, since many other foods contain protein, too.

For example, grains and dark green vegetables contain protein too. Dairy products, including milk, yogurt and cheese are also excellent sources of protein, and they contain calcium, which is needed for strong bones, too. If you use non-dairy milk substitutes, read labels carefully as some are excellent sources of protein, calcium and other nutrients, while others are lacking.

Next page: Choosing healthy protein foods, where to find protein, and the bottom line

Selecting Healthy Protein-Containing Foods

Keep in mind that the nutrient and caloric levels of each protein source varies greatly. For example, while an ounce of salmon contains the same amount of protein as a one ounce portion of pork, the salmon is a better choice because it contains healthy omega three fatty acids, which relieve inflammation.

Eat a wide array of protein and other types of food for maximum nutrition and pleasure. Lean protein products from animals and vegetable sources of protein can be very healthy foods, but how you prepare them affects their benefits. While the protein content remains intact regardless of how you prepare a dish such as chicken, if you choose to deep fry that protein, you are adding unhealthy calories and fat to your diet. The healthiest foods are eaten raw. If raw is not an option, prepare foods by braising, roasting, or broiling.

Meat and meat products from grass-fed, organic, or wild animals is preferable as it is leaner, less processed and has fewer chemicals in it when compared with mass-produced products.

Can I Get Enough Protein If I Am a Vegetarian or Vegan?

Many people worry that they can’t get enough protein by eating vegetarian or vegan diets. This is simply not true. Multiple research studies have proven that vegetarian diets easily provide adequate amounts of top quality protein.

In addition, by obtaining protein from vegetable sources, you are able to reap the many nutritional benefits plant-based foods offer. They are often low in calories, rich in fiber, and packed with a wide array of antioxidants, pigments, and other healthy compounds.

Unlike animal-based sources of protein, which contain varying levels of fat and cholesterol, food sourced from plants is generally lower in fats and does not contain any cholesterol.

Are Plant and Animal Proteins Created Equal?

Protein from animals contains all of the essential amino acids you need to consume in your diet, but only a few plant-based foods contain all of the essential amino acids your body needs. Only soy and quinoa contain all nine essential amino acids, and so are classified as complete proteins.

One advantage of eating a plant-based diet is that the foods have a mild alkalizing effect on your body. Meats and animal proteins cause your tissues to become more acidic, and acidity contributes to many health problems, including bone loss.

Protein and Osteoporosis: The Bottom Line

Eating a wide variety of protein-containing foods throughout your lifespan can help your bones to remain strong. Consuming most or all of your protein from plant sources offers multiple benefits for your bones and general level of wellness.

Consult with your health care provider for specific recommendations regarding the amount of protein which you should consume each day.