

Protein & Plant-Based Diets

Fact Sheet



Protein is an essential nutrient. Our bodies require protein to build cells, organs and muscles. However, more protein is not better. Excess protein is either stored as fat or it is excreted along with vital minerals such as calcium. Excreting excess protein can be taxing on the body, especially the kidneys.

In recent years, there has been a lot of publicity surrounding high-protein diets for weight loss, disease prevention, and improved athletic performance. However, the scientific research supporting these diets is limited. In fact, studies have shown that the healthiest diet is one that is high in carbohydrates, low in fat, and has an adequate amount of protein.

Amino acids are the building blocks that combine to form proteins. Of the 20 amino acids, nine are “essential,” meaning our bodies can’t make them; and so, they are essential to get from our diet. But other animals don’t make them either. All essential amino acids originate from plants (and microbes), and all plant proteins have all essential amino acids.

It’s easy to get all the protein you need without eating meat, dairy, or eggs. As long as you are eating enough calories from a varied plant-based diet including beans, nuts, seeds, whole grains, and vegetables you can easily meet your daily protein needs, without the risks of animal products. Previously, it was believed that eating a combination of different plant foods together was necessary to obtain their full protein value, also known as protein combining or complementing. However, we now understand that intentional combining is not required to obtain all of the essential amino acids.



Studies have shown that the average vegetarian or vegan meets or exceeds the recommended daily protein intake (0.8 grams per kilogram of bodyweight). Get plant-based protein from a variety of beans, nuts, seeds, soy, whole grains and vegetables.

Here is a sample menu for an adequate protein intake for a 160-pound adult (58g):

Meal	Contents	Protein (g)
Breakfast	1 cup oatmeal w/ blueberries, walnuts, and 1 cup soy milk	17
Lunch	Split pea soup, whole-grain bread with hummus, and a garden salad	21
Snack	Apple and peanut butter	4
Dinner	Mexican black beans and brown rice in corn tortillas with avocado and tomato salsa	18
Total		60

What About Soy Protein?

Myth: Soy protein increases breast cancer risk.

Fact: Research increasingly shows that soy's high isoflavone and antioxidant content are actually protective against cancers, including breast cancer and ovarian cancer, as well as other diseases.

Myth: Soy negatively impacts male hormones.

Contrary to some beliefs, soy products do not have adverse effects on men, and may even help prevent cancer. A meta-analysis of 15 randomized controlled trials showed that neither soy products nor soy isoflavone supplements had a significant effect on testosterone levels in men, indicating that soy intake is safe for male consumers. In fact, some studies suggest that soy may have protective effects against prostate cancer

Myth: All soy is “genetically modified” (GMO).

Fact: Many are concerned with the health implications of consuming genetically engineered foods such as soy. However, non-GMO soy foods are available. Look for soy foods labeled “certified organic” or “non-GMO”.

Bottom line: Whole soy foods are a healthful part of a whole-food plant-based diet.

Soy products offer a wide range of health benefits. Consumption of whole soy foods has been associated with a reduced risk of breast cancer, as well as several other types of cancer, fibroids, and inflammation. Additionally, soy may be beneficial for bone health, heart health, and alleviating menopausal symptoms. However, it's worth noting that the health benefits of soy appear to be derived from foods made from whole soy. Choose soy foods like edamame beans, tempeh, miso, tofu and soymilk. Avoid highly processed soy foods like soy protein isolates found in powders and soy-based meat substitutes.

References

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