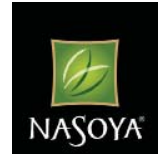


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Protein is Vital to Staying Strong

By Suzanne Dixon MPH, MS, RD

We've touched on the issue of dietary protein and how it impacts health in past newsletters. We're returning to the topic now, because it's so important. The latest research shows that to stay lean and strong as we age, protein should be a priority in our meals and snacks, morning, noon, and night.

Problems with Patterns

One of the main reasons we don't get as much benefit as we could out of protein is because we don't eat it consistently throughout the day. The problem isn't how much protein we are getting, but rather, how we are getting it during the day.

Most of us get the bulk of our protein toward the end of our day. A typical day might start with cereal, toast, and juice for breakfast. Not exactly a protein-packed meal. Many people have a sandwich or salad for lunch. We do a little better with this meal, but still fall far short of optimal. Snacks are often a piece of fruit or a handful of pretzels, neither of which gets us the protein we need when our energy levels are flagging between meals.

It's only at dinnertime that most of us get enough protein. And in this case, we tend to go overboard. We end up eating nearly our entire day's worth of protein in one sitting. Unfortunately, our bodies can't use this much protein at once.

Nutrient Focus

In addition to the pattern problem, vegetarians and vegans may face special challenges to getting certain nutrients into their diets. If you don't eat any meat, poultry, pork, or seafood at all, the new fortified tofu products are a good option. They have added vitamins B6, B12, and D; riboflavin (B2); calcium; and extra protein, all of which can be in short supply if you rarely or never eat animal foods.

Opting for Optimal

The latest research points the way to how we can optimize our protein pattern too (1). Our bodies best use protein

when it spaced evenly throughout the day. About 30 grams with each meal is ideal.

Under typical conditions, 30 grams is all we can use in one sitting. Thirty grams is the amount of protein that most stimulates muscles to repair themselves and build new cells too (1). Unfortunately, the majority of people tend to get about 10 grams of protein with breakfast, 15-20 grams with lunch, and a whopping 65 grams of protein at dinner (2).

To fix this protein problem, we need to think about spreading out our protein intake more evenly through each meal. This helps the protein fuel our muscles and best supports our bodies.

Moving Creates Muscle Magic

There is another piece of this puzzle. If we want to stay strong and lean with age, we need to move our muscles regularly. Strength training is important, especially for women. But if you feel that you're too time pressed for that, simply moving your body will help. It turns out that being sedentary, or inactive, is one of the absolute worst things we can do to our bodies as they age.

In healthy young adults, complete inactivity results in a loss of about one pound of pure muscle in a month (3). In older adults, it takes just 10 days of inactivity and the loss is 2.2 pounds (4). If you're an older adult, and you're coping with illness, surgery, or other stresses on your body, being in bed will deplete 2.2 pounds of muscle after just three short days (5)!

So the picture is clear. To keep ourselves healthy, lean, and strong, and to keep our bodies functioning at peak performance, we need to do two important things:

1. Focus on getting more protein at breakfast and lunch and a little less at dinner. Aim for 30 grams at each meal.
2. Move our bodies every chance we get. Take the stairs. Go for a walk on lunch hour. Pick up the leash and take the dog around the block. But whatever you do, don't stop moving!

What Type?

To best fuel your body, a mix of protein sources is ideal. Some studies suggest that animal proteins, such as beef

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and chicken, best stimulate our muscles to grow and repair themselves (1). But the latest research shows unique benefits of eating soy protein too. The study, presented at a recent American Gynecological and Obstetrical Society meeting, found that soy protein shakes can aid with fat loss in women (6).

Another reason to include soy is that it is one of the only "complete" plant proteins (7). Complete refers to any protein that provides all of the essential amino acids that the human body cannot make on its own. Amino acids are the building blocks of proteins.

And enjoying a balance of animal and plant proteins is likely to do your body another favor, especially if you have poor kidney function, diabetes, or high blood pressure. For people with these conditions, too much animal protein can compromise health, worsen kidney function, and may contribute to osteoporosis.

How to Get Your Thirty

As mentioned, for good health we need around 30 grams of protein with each meal. This includes breakfast, which typically is a protein-poor meal. Instead of your usual toast and jam, enjoy a scramble. Eggs are a great source of protein, but if you want to get a bit more soy into your day or are watching your cholesterol, try a tofu scramble.

For lunch, make sure you don't rely on protein poor choices such as a salad with no beans, nuts, seeds, soy, or lean animal proteins.

If you don't eat animal foods, cubed, marinated tofu is a great protein source. This is an ideal place to try out one of the fortified tofu products. You'll get more of the vitamins B6, B12, and D; riboflavin (B2); calcium; and extra protein that you need.

When planning out dinner, remember that most people get plenty of protein at this meal. Many get so much that their body isn't able to use it. If you're used to basing your evening meal around meat, try to expand your options.

Look to ethnic fare, such as Thai, Chinese, Mexican, and Indian, all of which offer creative ways to shift the meal away from meat and toward vegetables.

A big, colorful stir-fry is a great example of this type of eating. The bulk of your meal will be peppers, broccoli, carrots, cauliflower, and cabbage. Meat or fortified tofu provide the protein, but vegetables will take center stage.

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