

# Forever STRONG

Is protein a midlife must – or is it being overhyped? Anita Bean looks at the latest evidence that reveals it could help you lose weight, have more energy and even boost your long-term health



**W**hen we enter midlife, for many of us it can get harder to keep our weight constant and avoid so-called middle-aged spread. However, staying healthy doesn't come down to how much fat you have. Rather, it is about how much *muscle* you have, according to Dr Gabrielle Lyon, author of *Forever Strong: A New, Science-Based Strategy For Aging Well*. 'The single biggest problem with our health is not that we carry too much fat but that we don't carry enough muscle,' she says.

Dr Lyon believes that muscle is the secret to longevity: 'Building muscle is the most important safeguard for health because it is the bodily system that will allow us to live our longest life. The higher your healthy muscle mass, the greater your protection against all-cause mortality and morbidity.'

## More muscle = better health

When we think of muscles, the first thing that comes to mind is often their role in movement and exercise. Muscles allow us to walk, lift and perform countless other activities. But their significance goes beyond that. Muscles also contribute to our metabolic health. They are highly metabolically active tissues, meaning they burn energy even when they are resting.

'By increasing your muscle mass, you not only change your body's physical structure but also direct how your body uses both food and energy,' says Dr Lyon. 'You cut your risk of weight gain, improve blood sugar control and reduce the risk of chronic disease.' Studies show that strong muscles are far better at helping the body respond to insulin, resulting in better blood sugar control after meals and a reduced risk of type 2 diabetes and insulin resistance, which affects the health of the heart.

A study of more than 7,000 people with an average age of 46 showed that less than one hour of strength training a week lowered the risk of developing metabolic syndrome – a cluster of cardiovascular risk factors, such as weight gain, high blood pressure and elevated blood sugar – by 29%.

## Stronger diet

Diet also plays a vital role in building muscle mass – and protein is the king of muscle food. 'Protein provides the necessary building blocks for building muscle,' explains Dr Federica Amati, head nutritionist at personalised nutrition company ZOE and co-author of *Recipes For A Better Menopause*.

Protein also influences the hormones that control our appetite and hunger. In a study carried out at Sydney University, volunteers were given meals and snacks with the same calories but different amounts of protein. Without realising it, participants ate significantly more calories each day when on the lower-protein diet than the higher-protein one. 'Protein can help you feel fuller for longer,' explains Dr Lyon.

As for the best sources of protein, these include meat, fish, eggs, dairy, soya and legumes (beans, lentils, chickpeas and peas). If you already include these foods in your diet, you're doing well, but the key question is: are you eating enough?

As we get older, our muscles respond less to protein and exercise, blunting the process of muscle building. To combat this, we need an increased amount of protein in our diets as we age. Dr Lyon says the RDA (0.75g per kilogram of body weight per day) isn't enough for active people and we should ideally be consuming 1.2–1.6g protein per kilogram of body weight every day. So, a 65kg woman (equivalent to 10st 3lb) might need 78–104g of protein a day. If you include a palm-sized amount of protein in each meal, you're likely to hit your target.

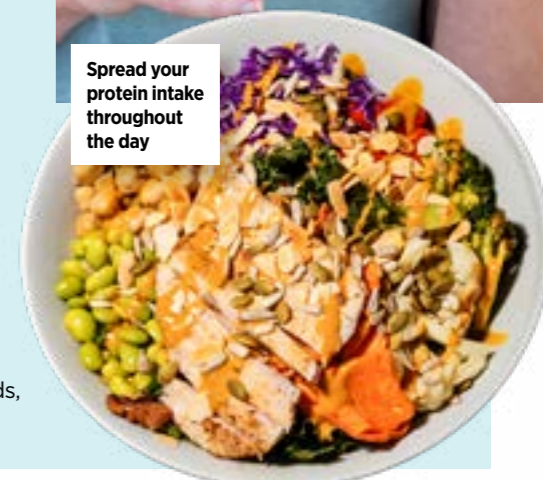
## Get what your body needs

- Starting your day with eggs is a good way to get protein (one medium egg contains 6.4g) and prevent hunger later in the day.
- Eating Greek yogurt is also a clever way to top up protein levels, especially if you sprinkle over a few nuts or seeds. Strained Greek yogurt (not Greek-style) typically contains about twice as much protein as ordinary yogurt, about 15g per 150g serving.
- For lunch or your evening meal, a serving of chicken, fish or meat will give you a protein boost, delivering 25–30g per 100g.
- If you're vegetarian or simply want a change from meat, then tofu, tempeh, beans and lentils are protein-packed. Tofu gives you 16g per 100g serving. A 100g serving of cooked lentils provides around 11g protein.

In fact, diets rich in plant protein may be particularly beneficial for health as we age. A study published in *The American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* found that women who got most of their protein from plant sources, plus a small amount of animal protein, were healthier later in life. 'Getting enough protein through plants alone certainly is possible; you just need to be a little more deliberate in your food choices,' says Dr Amati. 'Good plant sources of protein include nuts, seeds, pulses and soya.'



Spread your protein intake throughout the day



## What about carbs?

While protein is important for building muscle, you also need carbohydrates, as they are the main source of energy for our brains and bodies. 'Eating carbohydrates will also allow the protein you eat to repair muscle tissue instead of being converted to fuel,' explains personal trainer Kate Rowe-Ham. 'If you limit carbs, protein becomes the energy source and you won't be able to build lean muscle, meaning your workouts won't give you the results you want.' The key, she says, is to prioritise foods that haven't been refined.



Prioritise foods that haven't been through a refining process, such as fresh veg

## Be mindful of marketing

But what about 'protein-enriched' products, such as cereal bars and granolas? The truth is, while they offer convenience, they're often little more than marketing gimmicks.

'Many of these are ultra-processed,' says Dr Amati. 'There are plenty of ways to get adequate protein from whole foods, and when you eat the whole plant, you also get a wide range of other healthy compounds that many people are deficient in, such as fibre.'

## Use it or lose it

From the age of about 30, we begin to lose muscle. At first, this happens so slowly that we don't notice it. However, as the years go by, this loss of muscle accelerates and can lead to us losing a third of our muscle mass over a lifetime. As if that wasn't enough, we start losing strength even faster than we lose muscle, and fat begins to infiltrate our muscles. This leaves us weaker and slows our metabolism (the speed at which we burn energy), which can lead to weight gain, loss of mobility and a lower quality of life.

“It's never too late to start building muscle and strength”

The good news is that it doesn't take long to regain muscle strength and build muscle. 'Strength training is the best way to prevent this decline in muscle and to reverse the process and gain muscle mass and strength,' explains Kate Rowe-Ham.

'Strength training also makes our bones stronger, helps joint flexibility, creates mobility, decreases the risk of falls, lowers the risk of injury and boosts the immune system. It's never too late to start building muscle and strength. You can build muscle whatever your age.'

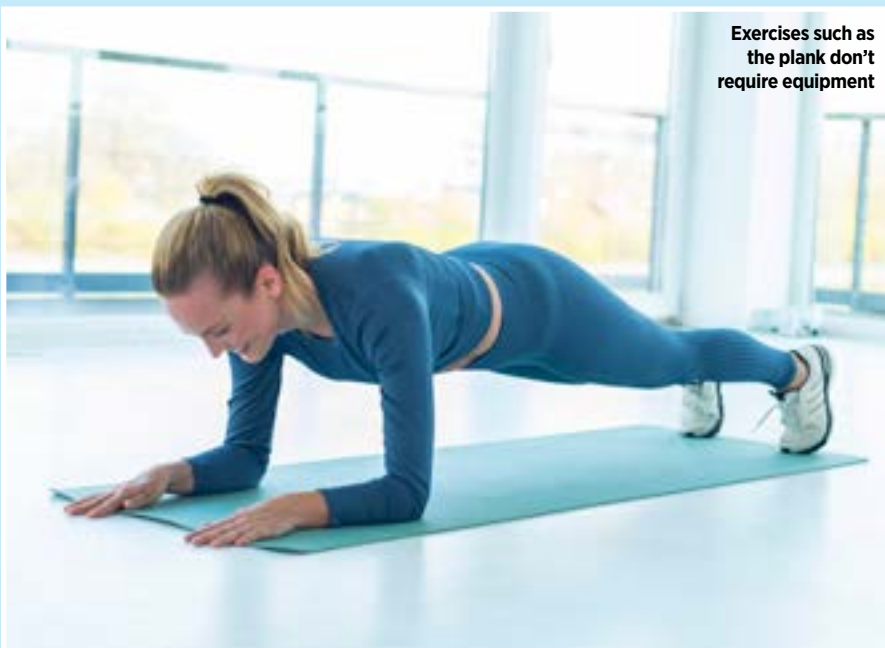
Squats are great for building up strength



Lifting weights helps to create muscle mass



Exercises such as the plank don't require equipment



## Tone at home

Personal trainer Kate Rowe-Ham, author of *Owning Your Menopause: Fitter, Calmer, Stronger In 30 Days*, suggests these five ways to build muscle:

- **Invest in a set of 3kg and 5kg weights.** Lifting a weight that you can manage for six to eight repetitions will create muscle mass and strength. Once you've mastered these, you can add a few more repetitions or change to a slightly heavier weight every few weeks. Ideally, aim for two or three sessions of strength training a week, ensuring you use good technique to avoid injury.
- **You can do many exercises with little or no equipment.** Try press-ups, planks, lunges and squats.
- **Resistance bands are effective and an inexpensive way to build strength.** They come in a variety of sizes and resistance levels and can be purchased in sports shops and online.
- **Try Pilates.** This complements strength training sessions by promoting core strength, muscle balance, stability, flexibility, mobility and improved posture, leading to more effective and well-rounded fitness.
- **Weigh yourself down.** Rucking – walking with a weighted rucksack – is a fast-growing fitness trend and a great alternative to traditional workouts. To build strength when you walk, place weights in a backpack or invest in a specially weighted jacket with adjustable weighted pockets. Start with a light weight – say, 5-10kg – and build up gradually. □