

# ARE WE eating TOO MUCH PROTEIN?

There's no doubt it has a massive health halo, but has our obsession with protein gone too far? Our nutritionist, Anita Bean, investigates

**P**rotein bars and drinks were once solely the domain of bodybuilders and athletes, but scan supermarket shelves now and you'll find everything from snack bars and smoothies to breakfast cereals, crisps, sliced bread, porridge and even water boasting high-protein claims. You can tuck into five different Protein Pots at Eat, while Pret's menu includes a Smoked Salmon Protein Box and an Egg & Avocado Protein Pot. Even foods naturally high in protein, such as cheese and yogurt, are sold in protein-boosted versions. And food labels often now highlight protein grams.

According to Mintel's Global New Products Database (GNPD), the number of food and drink products launched in the UK with a high-protein claim rose by 498% between 2010 and 2015. One trend is the emergence of high-protein versions of chocolate bars. Snickers Protein, for example, has 11g of protein, 7g more than a standard bar. 'Adding protein to an otherwise high-calorie, high-sugar product doesn't make it healthier,' explains Helen West, registered dietitian and co-author of *Is Butter A Carb? Unpicking Fact From Fiction In The World Of Nutrition*. 'It's still a confectionary bar!' In reality, manufacturers are using our obsession with protein as a marketing opportunity.'



A balanced diet should provide enough protein



Most of us get more than enough protein from food



## CAN PROTEIN HELP YOU LOSE WEIGHT?

According to Mintel, one in four people say they go out of their way to eat high-protein foods. But there is no clear evidence to say higher intakes are beneficial for weight loss. 'Protein isn't a miracle ingredient,' explains Helen. 'What matters is your overall calorie balance (intake vs output).' While a slightly higher proportion of protein may help people feel less hungry, the jury is still out on whether high-protein foods can aid weight loss. The European Food Safety Authority is not convinced. Its restrictions say no food can claim protein makes you feel fuller for longer.

## DO YOU NEED EXTRA WHEN YOU EXERCISE?

It depends how much you exercise, but probably not. If you do resistance exercise, such as weight training or resistance bands, or Pilates and



## Good health

ashtanga yoga or strenuous endurance exercise, such as running or cycling, more than three times a week, you'll need a little more protein to repair and build your muscles. The US Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics recommends 1.2-2g per 1kg body weight per day. But if you do an average amount of physical activity, simply stick to the general guidelines (see box, below right).

### CAN YOU GET ENOUGH PROTEIN JUST FROM FOOD?

Most of us get more than enough protein from food and have little difficulty meeting the recommended intake. According to the latest statistics from the Government's National Diet and Nutrition Survey, the average daily protein intake is 66g for women and 88g for men, roughly one and a half times more than we need. 'It's very easy to get enough protein without supplementing,' says registered nutritionist Claire Baseley. 'Foods with added protein are, for most people, unnecessary.'

### IS IT DANGEROUS TO HAVE TOO MUCH?

There have been concerns in the past that a high protein intake can harm the kidneys and bones, but the evidence shows that this is not the case in healthy people (anyone with severe kidney disease is advised to follow a low-protein diet and avoid extra protein).

However, the type of protein you eat may be more important than the amount. Meat-heavy diets have been linked to increased risks of heart disease, type 2 diabetes, some cancers and, according to a large study published in *The Lancet* in 2018, may even shorten your life.

There are concerns, too, that a high protein intake may harm the gut microbiota (the bacteria that inhabit our gut). 'If you're eating lots of protein, as in the case of the carnivore diet, you're probably not eating many plant foods, such as fruit and vegetables, and therefore not getting much fibre,' explains Helen. This can change the balance of friendly bacteria in the gut, which protect us from infections, make vitamins and influence our weight and mood. The World Cancer Research Fund recommends the consumption of foods 'mostly of plant origin'.

### WHAT'S THE BOTTOM LINE?

Next time you're tempted to buy a product that's protein enhanced, remember that most of us get plenty from ordinary food (see menu, right). Consuming more protein than you need offers no health advantage. The body can only use so much for repair, and once it's taken what it needs, any excess is passed out in urine and used as a fuel source, or potentially stored as fat (if you consume too many calories).



## HOW DO I KNOW IF I'M MEETING MY NEEDS?

**WE NEED PROTEIN** for healthy growth and for the repair of all body cells. It's also needed for making enzymes, hormones and antibodies. Government guidelines recommend about 45g for a 60kg (9st 7lb) woman. To give you an idea of what this looks like, there are 28g in an average (125g) chicken breast, 24g in a 100g tin of salmon and 15g in 3 tablespoons of Greek

yogurt. However, the amount of protein we need increases a little as we get older. This is because the ability to convert protein from food into muscle decreases once we hit our 60s, and the risk of age-related muscle loss increases. To help preserve muscle mass and strength, researchers recommend a daily protein intake of 60-72g for a 60kg woman.

## HERE'S HOW TO GET ENOUGH PROTEIN

### • BREAKFAST

3 tablespoons (150g) plain **low-fat Greek yogurt** with 1 tablespoon **granola** and a handful of **blueberries** (or other fruit). 18g protein.

• **LUNCH** **M&S Chicken & Bacon Caesar Wrap**. 26g protein.

• **DINNER** One fillet (100g) of **grilled salmon** with 3 tablespoons (125g) cooked **basmati rice** and **broccoli** (or any other veg). 30g protein.

• **SNACKS** 1 heaped tablespoon (25g) **hummus** with **vegetable crudites**. 3g protein.

**TOTAL PROTEIN = 77G**

### VEGETARIAN MENU

• **BREAKFAST** 1 medium bowl of **porridge** (40g oats plus 250ml semi-skimmed milk) with 1 **banana** and 1 tablespoon of **pumpkin seeds**. 19g protein.

• **LUNCH** One Pret **Humous & Chipotle Wrap** and one pot (170g) **low-fat Greek yogurt**. 29g protein.

• **DINNER** **Tofu Pad Thai** (check out our tasty recipe at [goodhousekeeping.com/uk](http://goodhousekeeping.com/uk)). 21g protein.

• **SNACKS** A matchbox-sized piece (25g) of **cheese**, 1 tablespoon (15g) of **nuts**. 10g protein.

**TOTAL PROTEIN = 78G** □

