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Our Obsession with Protein... and What We Should Be Thinking About Instead

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Walk into any grocery store today, and you will find hundreds of products touting their high protein content, from yogurts to pasta to trail mix. Take a look at a fitness magazine or go into a supplement store, and you will find supplements, powders, and bars all geared toward people who want to eat more protein.

There is no doubt that protein is essential to health. We need it to build the tissues of our bodies, including muscle, bone, and blood. But are Americans really so protein-deficient? Does eating more protein really lead to better health, weight loss, or a more muscular physique?

Despite marketers' claims to the contrary, the answer to most of those questions is probably no.

How Much We Need...

The Recommended Daily Allowance for protein for the average person is 0.36 grams per pound (or 0.8 kg/lb). You can estimate your protein needs by multiplying your weight in pounds by 0.36. For a person weighing 150 pounds, for example, that would be about 54 grams of protein per day. A person's protein needs increase when they are building new tissue. For example, a woman who is pregnant is advised to eat quite a bit more, around 75 to 100 grams a day, in order to support the growth of her baby as well as her own body. A person who is recovering from surgery or burns would also need more protein. Elderly people, who often have smaller appetites than they did when younger, should make an effort to include protein in their diets to prevent muscle loss. Someone who is

actively training to build muscle should also consume more protein, but simply eating more protein will not increase your muscle mass.

Let's say you need 60 grams of protein a day, based on your weight or activity level. You can reach that goal in a day by consuming a 4-ounce chicken breast, a cup of yogurt, and a half a cup of beans.

That does not even factor in the protein found in the other foods you probably also ate that day—even bread, pasta, and vegetables contain protein.

How Much We Get...

Most Americans eat about 15% of their

calories from protein, which is well within the recommended amount. In fact, some studies suggest that Americans are eating too much protein. More importantly, we should be considering the "package" the protein comes in. High protein foods include red meat, poultry, fish, dairy, eggs, beans, seeds, and nuts. Let's consider what else is in some of these foods besides protein.

For example, a 6-ounce steak has about 38 grams of protein, but also 44 grams of fat, most of which is saturated, or unhealthy, fat. A 6-ounce piece of salmon has 34 grams of protein and about 18 grams of fat, most of which are unsaturated, or healthy fats. A cup of beans has 18 grams of protein, and less than 1 gram of fat. It is also full of fiber, which we will talk about in a moment.

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Our Obsession with Protein... (cont.)

How the Body Deals with Excess Protein

It's important to note that any calories eaten in excess of what you are expending, regardless of whether they are from carbohydrate, fat, or protein, will be stored by the body as fat. Very high protein diets can also put one at risk for kidney stones, and if the protein in the diet comes from red meat, that may increase your risk of heart disease and certain cancers.

What People are *Not* Eating When They are Eating More Protein

Some studies do suggest eating more protein might have health benefits, such as helping to maintain a healthy weight, or even reduced risk of stroke. However, it is also important to consider what people are *not* eating when they are eating more protein. There are only a few nutrients that provide calories: carbohydrates, fats, and proteins. If protein is replacing refined starches and sugars, or unhealthy fats, that alone will make the overall diet healthier. High protein diets that contain lots of red meat, or worse, processed meat, have more health risks than benefits.



The Nutrient We *Should* be Eating More Of

One thing most Americans are getting too little of is fiber. A study completed in 2018, for example, showed that just 4 percent of men and 12 percent of women are eating the recommended amount of fiber. Fiber recommendations vary, but the general consensus is that adults should be getting at least 25-30 grams of fiber a day.

Studies show that people who consume more fiber have a lower risk of diabetes, colorectal cancers, stroke, and heart disease. Higher fiber diets can also help maintain constant blood sugar levels, lower cholesterol and blood

pressure, and promote healthy body weight.

Fibers are a type of carbohydrate found in plants that our bodies cannot break down. Fiber travels to our guts, where it can have several effects, depending on the type of fiber. Some fiber slows down movement of food through the gut, lowering cholesterol and reducing blood sugar spikes. Some fibers prevent constipation, and still others serve as food for the bacteria in our guts, promoting a healthy microbiome.

We are only now beginning to understand the role of gut health on overall physical and mental health, and fiber plays a huge role in modulating our gut microbiome, which has far-reaching effects throughout the body. Gut microbes stimulate and regulate the immune system, break down toxins, and even produce certain vitamins that our bodies need, like vitamin K. Gut health influences mental health as much of the serotonin produced in our bodies is made in the gut. Imbalances in gut bacteria, also known as dysbiosis, likely play a role in the development of many disorders, from autism to depression to heart disease to autoimmune diseases like lupus and Crohn's disease. A diet rich in fiber from a variety of high-fiber foods improves the quantity and diversity of gut microbes.

What Our Ancestors Ate

It is interesting to consider our biology and evolution when contemplating diet. Many high protein diets claim that ancestral humans ate lots of meat. While our ancestors certainly did learn to hunt and eventually cook their food, ancestral humans who were hunter gatherers probably consumed a lot more plant food than animal food, considering the energy expenditure, threat of injury, and low success rate of hunting. One of the reasons we crave salt, sugar, and fat, is because those nutrients were hard to come by, and rich in calories or electrolytes that our bodies need to function. The idea that ancient humans consumed great quantities of meat is not well-supported by science. Instead, we were probably eating plants that could be found in our environments, including fibrous root vegetables, fruit, grasses, and even bark. Insects and grubs were likely consumed in addition to any animal that could be caught, but even in hunter gatherer societies that still exist today, meat makes up a fairly small part of the diet. So it is likely that today's diet is much higher in protein and much lower in fiber than what our ancestors ate.

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Our Obsession with Protein... (cont.)

Ways to Add More Fiber to Your Diet

Vegetables... Adding more plants to your diet, in the form of fruits and vegetables, is a surefire way to boost your fiber intake. Add berries to your cereal or yogurt, sliced avocado to your sandwich, and a side salad with your dinner.

Legumes... Beans are another great fiber-rich addition to meals for extra fiber. Toss some beans on a salad or into your favorite soup. Chickpeas are very versatile and can be roasted as a snack or pureed into hummus as a dip. Black beans are great on nachos, in quesadillas, or even on their own as a side dish.

Seeds and Nuts... Nuts and seeds are also rich in fiber. You can add them to a smoothie or top a bowl of yogurt or cereal with them. Sunflower seeds and pumpkin seeds go great on salads. Nut butters of course make great sandwiches, and can also be incorporated into stir-fries, grain bowls, and salad dressings. Roasted nuts can be eaten as a snack, just be sure to keep it to a handful or so if you are watching your calories.

Whole Grains... Choose whole grains, like brown rice and wheat bread, to increase your fiber intake. Oatmeal is another good option and can be made sweet or savory depending on your preference. And popcorn is a healthy, fiber-rich snack as long as you go easy on the butter.

Variety... Eating a wide variety of fiber-rich plant foods ensures that you are getting all the different types of fiber your body, and gut bacteria, need.

Adding Fiber Products

If you simply cannot meet your fiber needs by diet alone, there are many fiber products on the market today, including carbonated beverages that contain added fiber. They are usually marketed as containing “prebiotics”, which is a fancy word for something that feeds our gut bacteria. It is important to note, however, that these are purified forms of fiber that may be more easily broken down and therefore may not provide the same benefits as fiber found naturally in food. The benefit of some fiber is in fact that we can’t break it down, and it travels all the way to our lower intestines, where it feeds gut microbes and improves regularity.



Spirituality Corner: Yoga, Tai Chi, and Meditation

Many people feel a connection to the sacred or transcendent by focusing their thoughts or when making mindful movements with their body or energy. Yoga, tai chi, and meditation are different practices that combine mind-body-breath to help us feel more connected to ourselves. The practices can be personalized and incorporated into a spirituality practice in a variety of ways.

Yoga

It is believed that yoga originated in India many thousands of years ago. The word yoga comes from the Sanskrit word “yuj,” which means “union” or “to join.” It combines physical postures, concentration, and breathing techniques. A regular yoga practice can help us make deeper connections with our inner selves and gain insight to help us be the best version of ourselves. Interested in trying it out? Here’s a simple pose from yogajournal.com to get you started.

Sidebending Mountain Pose

This standing pose frees your breath by opening the

intercostal muscles between your ribs that expand and contract with your lungs as you breathe. The breath is the pathway for prana (“life force”), which enlivens us and connects the mind and body. During this pose, pay attention to your breath and the sensations of your body. When your mind drifts, try to bring it back to your breath.

Start in a standing position. Take a few breaths and feel rooted to the earth through your feet. During an inhalation extend your arms up and bring your palms together overhead. Lift through the top of your head, keep your shoulders relaxed, and engage your abdominal muscles to support your lower back. Exhale to sidebend to your right. Stay in this position for about 5 more breaths. On an inhalation come back to center. On an exhalation sidebend to your left. Stay in this position for about 5 more breaths. On an inhalation come back to center. On an exhalation slowly release your arms back to your sides.

Looking for more? [Check out Yoga With Adriene on YouTube.](#)

Spirituality Corner: Yoga, Tai Chi, and Meditation

Tai Chi

Tai chi is believed to have originated in China. The word "tai" means "supreme," "chi" means "boundary." Chi, or Qi, is the concept of energy or life force. Like yoga, its principles include connecting mind and body to tap into one's inner self. Tai chi's roots are in martial arts self-defense, focusing on redirecting attacks vs. opposing with force, and is best known for its slow and intentional movements. The practice typically follows a routine of specific movements that flow from one to another. Breath is coordinated with the movements to help promote relaxation. Interested in trying it out? Here is a movement from livestrong.com.



Part the Horse Mane

Bring both hands in one on top of the other with a space in the middle, palms facing each other, as if you're carrying a ball.

Shift your weight to whichever foot is on the same side as the top hand. So if your right hand is on top, shift your weight to your right foot.

Bring the opposite leg in front and as you shift your weight to the front leg, move the bottom hand forward as if you're throwing a Frisbee.

The other hand should come back and down to "rest on a large dog's head."

Looking for more? [Check out Taiflow's 5 Minutes a Day on YouTube.](#)

Meditation

Meditation is the practice of quieting the mind and focusing on the present moment, and differs from the movement aspects central to yoga and tai chi. The earliest references to meditation come from India. It has been associated with many religious contexts and practices. Although there is no universally accepted definition of meditation, a more modern Western approach may involve a static body posture, the recitation of a mantra, or focusing attention on thoughts, emotions, and sensations. It's *not* about letting our thoughts wander or trying to empty our mind. Interested in trying it out? Here's a practice from the New York Times.

Body Scan

Find a comfortable position. Systematically focus on the sensations of your body, starting with your toes all the way to your head. Go slowly, one inch at a time. In the beginning you might not notice any sensations, but over time you will start to notice warmth, coolness, tingling, lightness, heaviness, tightness, or other sensations. Whatever you feel, notice it and continue with the practice. Try not to react, to judge it as good or bad. If your mind wanders, gently return your attention to the body scan.

Looking for more? [Check out Goodful's 5-minute Meditation on YouTube.](#)

*This article was contributed by our Wellness Ambassador, **Erin Lubniewski**, Occupational Therapist at Crestwood Treatment Center Fremont. (If you are interested in becoming a Wellness Ambassador for your campus, please contact Margaret at mclayton@cbhi.net.)*



"You have to grow from the inside out. None can teach you, none can make you spiritual. There is no other teacher but your own soul."

-Swami Vivekananda

Warm Roasted Vegetable Farro Salad

This is a fiber-packed, hearty recipe that can stand on its own as a main dish or be served as a side dish. The vegetables used here are winter vegetables, but they can easily be swapped out for summer favorites like zucchini, tomatoes, bell peppers and asparagus as the seasons change. For a gluten-free version, swap the farro out for quinoa, brown rice, or millet. If you're vegan, simply leave out the cheese. And if you do want more protein, top this salad with a chicken breast, salmon fillet, fried egg, or chickpeas. (Makes about 6 servings as a side or 4 servings as a main dish.)

Ingredients

For the farro:

- 1 cup farro
- 2 cups water or vegetable broth

For the roasted vegetables:

- 1 large red onion, cut into chunks
- 3 cups butternut squash or sweet potato, peeled and cubed
- 2 cups carrots or parsnips, peeled and chopped
- 2 tbsp olive oil
- ½ tbsp garlic powder or 2 cloves minced garlic

Dressing:

- ¼ cup lemon or orange juice
- ¼ cup red wine vinegar
- ¼ cup olive oil
- ½ tbsp Italian seasoning, or basil, oregano, parsley

Other ingredients:

- 3 cups kale
- 1 cup walnuts, pistachios, or almonds, chopped
- 1 cup dried cranberries, currants, or other dried fruit
- ½ cup feta, crumbled
- Salt and pepper to taste



Bring the water or broth to a boil, then add the farro. Simmer until tender and chewy, then drain. For the roasted vegetables, toss the vegetables with the olive oil and garlic (powder). Spread in an even layer on a sheet pan and roast at 400 degrees for about 30 minutes, or until easily pierced with a fork. While the farro and vegetables are still hot, toss with the kale to wilt it. (If you prefer more tender kale, add the kale to the farro cooking water for the last few minutes of cooking.) Combine the dressing ingredients and mix well. Pour the dressing over the farro and vegetables and mix well. Stir in the nuts and dried fruit, and sprinkle cheese over top. Season with salt and pepper to taste.

Any Health and Wellness News Questions?

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“Eating healthy food fills your body with energy and nutrients. Imagine your cells smiling back at you and saying: ‘Thank you!’”

-Karen Salmansohn