

## **Incorporating Proteins into a Healthy Diet**

Protein is essential to the growth of muscles, hair, skin, bones, and many other parts of our bodies. Because we cannot store protein in our body like we do with fats, it is very important that we are eating the right amount of protein to carry out normal bodily functions. Let's talk all about proteins and discuss how they can hurt or help us, and how we can incorporate them into our lives based on our own needs.

If you are looking to lose weight, protein can help you feel full. There are nerves that connect your brain to your gut that function in communicating if you are hungry, or if you are full. These nerves are called mu-opioid receptors (MORs), and the process of telling the brain about stomach fullness is called modulation. When you eat and your MORs become blocked, your brain is told to stop eating, resulting in feeling full. So, what does all of this have to do with protein? Well, peptides, or digested protein products, function in blocking the MORs.<sup>1</sup> What this means is that high protein foods will help you feel satisfied and full for longer than other foods.

Proteins struggle to function on their own. So, if you are trying to lose or maintain your weight using the Keto diet, you might want to rethink if this is something you really want to do. In fact, your body will utilize protein better if you are eating carbohydrates at the same time.<sup>2</sup> Let's review the relationship between proteins and carbohydrates;

- Proteins build muscles, skin, and other parts of the body. To build these parts, your body needs healthy energy. Carbohydrates are the main source of energy that assists in building in the body. Without carbohydrates, protein wouldn't have enough energy to build muscles, hair, skin, nails, and other parts of the body. Protein and carbohydrates are necessary for the body to complete daily functions – they are both equally important.<sup>3</sup>
- Having a balance of protein and carbohydrates in your body also helps to build muscles faster. Building muscles faster means you can also burn calories faster, resulting in weight loss and the creation of a faster metabolism. Proteins and

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<sup>1</sup> HealthCentral.com

<sup>2</sup> ProMaxNutrition.com

<sup>3</sup> ProMaxNutrition.com

carbohydrates are needed in our diets because both help regulate blood sugar levels. Let's take a second to talk about that.<sup>4</sup>

Protein can also assist in maintaining stable blood glucose levels. In other words, protein helps balance the amount of sugar in your blood that is needed for energy to help cellular function.<sup>5</sup> Say you have a big portion of protein, such as a steak. As you digest the steak, the proteins from the steak are broken down into amino acids, which are the building blocks that create muscles, hair, skin, and other things in your body. Then, the amino acids are absorbed into the bloodstream to be delivered to these areas.

When your body detects a high level of amino acids in the bloodstream, the pancreas begins to produce and release glucagon, a hormone that makes the liver release stored sugar, and insulin, which makes muscles, hair, skin and other parts of your body absorb amino acids and sugars.<sup>6</sup> Insulin balances the amount of sugar in the bloodstream and in the muscles, which allows the body to maintain stable glucose levels after protein consumption.

However, if you have diabetes, this process is different. When your body doesn't produce insulin, blood sugar levels rise because glucagon is still being released from the pancreas. Your doctor may suggest taking extra insulin if you are about to have a high-protein meal and you have diabetes – just to be safe.<sup>7</sup>

Now that we know how protein works, let's discuss how to find and eat protein sources that will benefit us. The American Cancer Society says that women should be having five ounces of protein a day, and men should be having six.<sup>8</sup> A portion of meat looks like the size of a deck of cards and should be about two to three ounces in weight.<sup>9</sup>

There are good sources of protein, and there are bad. WebMD notes some healthful sources;

- **Seafood** is a great source of protein. It is low in fat and high in protein. Salmon, however, has healthy fat, called omega-3 fatty acids, which is good for your heart.
- Another great source of protein is **poultry**. The white meat from turkey or chicken is a healthier source because it is lower in fat compared to the dark meat. Poultry skin is especially high in saturated fat, so it would be wise to remove it before eating it.

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<sup>4</sup> ProMaxNutrition.com

<sup>5</sup> DLife.com

<sup>6</sup> DLife.com

<sup>7</sup> DLife.com

<sup>8</sup> Cancer.org

<sup>9</sup> Heart.org

- Milk, cheese, yogurt, and other **dairy products** are healthy sources of protein. These products also contain a lot of calcium, and sometimes have added vitamin D, which make them a great way to get protein in your diet.
- The least expensive source of protein would be protein from **eggs**. If you are worried about cholesterol or fats from eggs, having one a day will not hinder health goals.
- **Beans** and other legumes are filled with protein and fiber. In fact, only a half cup of beans has the same amount of protein as one ounce of steak.
- Protein found in **soy** can help lower cholesterol. Soy is lower in fat compared to other protein sources. This category includes tofu, which can be enjoyed in endless amount of ways.

Along with milk, eggs, legumes, and soy, there are tons of ways to get protein without needing to eat meat. Some vegetables are high in protein and loaded with vitamins and minerals. Medical News Today reminds us of some of these vegetables.

- One cup of **asparagus** has 2.9 grams of protein. Asparagus is a great option to have if you are also looking for prebiotic, anti-inflammatory and anticancer benefits.
- One cup of **mustard greens** has 1.5 grams of protein. Mustard greens also have antioxidant properties and may even reduce cholesterol.
- Both **broccoli** and **cauliflower** have over 2 grams of protein per one cup. They also have anti-inflammatory and antioxidant benefits. They are both low in calories, and broccoli may even improve liver health.
- **Brussel sprouts** have a whopping 3 grams of protein per cup. They are high in fiber and they promote healthy levels of intestinal bacteria.

It's smart to be aware of the not-so-healthy sources of protein, so we can begin to limit them in our diets. Bacon, hot dogs, sausages, cold cuts, and all types of processed meats should be avoided. Although they have a good amount of protein, they also are high in cholesterol, saturated fat, and sodium.<sup>10</sup> Eating these kinds of protein sources frequently can raise blood cholesterol and worsen heart disease. In fact, a good portion of red and processed meats are flagged by the World Health Organization as carcinogens, which are cancer causing substances.<sup>11</sup>

Protein is needed for our bodies to function properly. Now that we know how it works and how it can hurt or help us, we can begin to achieve our health goals.

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<sup>10</sup> Heart.org

<sup>11</sup> WHO.int

Sources:

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