



Being a Vegetarian – Healthily

WHAT IS PROTEIN?

Protein is a major component of enzymes, hormones, body tissues, the immune system, and virtually every cell and fluid in the body. It is made up of building blocks called amino acids. Amino acids can be synthesized in the body, but nine of them, called essential amino acids, must be ingested from food.

There are 20 amino acids. The body itself can make eleven of these amino acids, while the other nine (called essential amino acids) must be absorbed from food. The classification of an amino acid as essential or non-essential does not reflect its importance, because all 20 amino acids are necessary for health.

Plant Sources of Protein Plant sources of protein alone can provide adequate amounts of the essential and non-essential amino acids, assuming that dietary protein sources from plants are varied and that total calorie intake is sufficient to meet energy needs. Whole grains, legumes (beans), vegetables, seeds, and nuts all contain essential and non-essential amino acids.

Some plant foods are low in one kind of amino acid (e.g. grains are low in lysine), while other plant foods are higher in that amino acid (e.g. legumes are quite high in lysine). So by eating a well balanced diet that contains a variety of foods it is possible to obtain all the amino acids that the body requires.

Note that although recent research has shown that soy protein contains all essential amino acids, and is therefore a complete protein source, it is still advisable to ensure there are a variety of protein sources in the diet.

It was previously believed that in order for vegetarians to obtain adequate amounts of protein, all of the essential amino acids had to be 'balanced' at each meal. For example, grains and legumes had to be consumed at the same meal. This is referred to as "protein combining". However, more recent research has indicated that, while consuming a proper mix of amino acids is important, it is not necessary to consume them all at the same meal.

In addition to this there are several advantages to eating plant rather than animal protein:

- The diet contains less cholesterol, which is associated with heart disease. Plant foods contain no cholesterol.
- The diet contains more fibre, which reduces the risk of bowel diseases, including cancer.
- Women can halve their risk of breast cancer by regularly eating soy products.

REQUIREMENTS AND RDI

Nutrition experts recommend that protein, as a source of amino acids, should account for 10-12% of the calories in a balanced diet. However, requirements for protein are affected by age, weight, state of health, level of activity, and other factors. (Ask for Dietary Needs Assessment questionnaire)

The RDI for Australian adults is based on the value of 0.75 g/kg body weight/day proposed by the FAO-WHO-UNU. Most adults in the Western world eat about 100 grams of protein per day, or about twice what their bodies need and at least as much as any athlete requires.

VEGETARIAN DIETARY SOURCES

Although most vegetarian diets meet or exceed the Recommended Dietary Intake for protein, they often provide less protein than non-vegetarian diets. This lower protein intake may be associated with better calcium retention in vegetarians and improved kidney function in individuals with prior kidney damage. Further, lower protein intakes may result in a lower fat intake with its inherent advantages, because foods high in protein are also frequently high in fat.

The best plant source of protein is legumes, including lentils, kidney beans, chickpeas, split peas, lima beans, mung beans, baked beans etc., and soy products such as tempeh. The highest source per 100 grams is cooked soybeans, with 13.5 grams of protein.

Nuts and seeds are very high in protein, but because they also contain quite high levels of fat, they should be eaten in moderation. The highest source per 100 grams is peanuts, with over 27 grams of protein.

Grains, such as breakfast cereals, bread, rice and pasta are lower in protein, but still contribute useful amounts to the diet. Some vegetables also add to the overall protein intake.

It is best to rely on a range of legumes and nuts for your main sources of protein, rather than just one primary source, e.g. soy. A suggestion is to buy a large range of dried legumes. (Eating a variety of legumes at the one time maximises the range of amino acids consumed.) Mix them all together and soak 2-3 cups of the mixture overnight. Boil them up, cooked and drain them.

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Some can be used straight away for the current meal and the rest stored in the fridge for the following few days. The cooked legumes can be added to many dishes, e.g. soups, casseroles etc. to enhance the protein content, or even put at the side of meals (a bit like the meat in 'meat and 3 veg!'). They are good just on their own, warmed up and simply served with some tamari and flax seed oil poured over the top. (This is really nice, and the flax is a good source of omega 3 essential fatty acids!)

Quinoa, is a grain that contains over 16% protein. It is delicious and doesn't really need to be soaked prior to cooking. Like with legumes, quinoa can be eaten on its own with some tamari and flax seed oil. It can also be added to soups, casseroles and many other dishes.

By basing your protein intake around legumes, mixed nuts and quinoa, and by also regularly consuming rice, sunflower seeds, pepitas, tahini, wholegrain breads etc. in your diet, you are ensuring that your protein requirements are adequately met.

If you are concerned that your protein intake may not be adequate I recommended that you see an Accredited practising Dietitian who specialises in vegetarian nutrition.

DO VEGETARIAN DIETS PROVIDE ENOUGH IRON?

There are two types of iron. Non-heme iron is the type of iron found in plant foods. It is not absorbed as well as heme iron, which is the type of iron found in meats. Eating a vitamin C rich food at the same meal can enhance absorption of non-heme iron in plant foods. Vegetarian diets can provide a good supply of iron if the proper foods are eaten.

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