

Go Lean with Protein

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Do you enjoy tender steaks, juicy burgers, grilled chicken, baked fish, or eggs? These are all animal protein foods. Do not forget about your plant based protein foods such as creamy peanut butter, savory almonds, delicious beans, and breaded tofu. Proteins from both animal and plant sources serve as building blocks for our muscles, bones, teeth, organs, and tissues. Proteins help keep our skin soft and our hair luxurious! They even play a role in our ability to clot blood and fight off illnesses. But can you get too much of a good thing or could you be deficient?



Protein, like carbohydrate and fat, provides our bodies with calories. All three of these nutrients should be eaten every day. However, it is important to balance the calories you eat with the calories you expend. Eating more calories than your body needs can lead to weight gain. It does not matter whether the excess is from protein, carbohydrates, or fat, too much is too much.



It is rare to see a protein deficiency in America because most of us love to eat grilled chicken, hamburgers, sirloin steaks, eggs, nuts, and even veggie burgers. Even though protein foods are widely available, protein supplements are still hot on the market. Americans spend tons of money each year on protein supplements when they could get this nutrient simply by eating our favorite thing, food! In fact, most of us eat more than the 5-7 ounces of protein that we need every day (to give you a visual, 2-3 ounces of meat is about the size of a deck of cards and restaurant serving sizes are often much larger).

A popular supplement advertised for enhancing athletic performance is Branch Chain Amino Acids (BCAA). The claim is that they provide protein in its simplest form, so it is easy for your body to digest. Plus BCAA can be metabolized directly by the muscle (without being processed by the liver first). What companies do not say is that these supplements typically only have 1-3 of the 9 essential amino acids your body needs to keep your muscles, skin, and hair healthy and strong. The companies also fail to mention that you can get BCAA by consuming protein foods (like meat, eggs, soy and dried beans) and dairy (milk, yogurt and low-fat cheese). It is better for your body and for your wallet to eat protein foods, not supplements.

What is the take home message? Protein foods do amazing things for your body, but healthy adults can skip the supplements and focus on lean protein foods. Try these tips to make lean protein part of your healthy lifestyle:

- Use ground turkey, bison, or even lean beef instead of regular ground beef to make casseroles or burgers
- Throw your favorite meats like venison, chicken, or fish on the grill to add flavor without extra fat
- Try breading and baking chicken instead of frying it
- Aim for 8 ounces of seafood a week; try salmon burgers or grilled tuna
- Go Meatless on Mondays! Swap the beef in your taco with black beans or try tofu in place of chicken in your stir-fry

Looking for a new way to incorporate lean protein into your healthy lifestyle? Try the following recipe compliments of www.meatlessmonday.com. Enjoy your lentil taco topped with shredded lettuce, fresh chopped tomato, reduced fat cheese, and fat free sour cream.

Spiced Lentil Tacos

Ingredients:

- 1 tablespoon canola oil
- 1 onion, diced
- 2 cloves garlic
- 1 cup dried lentils
- 1 tablespoon chili powder
- 2 teaspoons ground cumin
- 1 teaspoon dried oregano
- 2 ½ cups low sodium vegetable or chicken broth
- 1 cup salsa

Place the canola oil in a skillet over medium-high heat. Saute the garlic and onion for 4-6 minutes, or until they become soft and fragrant.

Add the lentils and season with the chili powder, cumin and oregano. Stir so that the spices are easily distributed.

Slowly add the broth and bring to a boil. Reduce heat to medium-low, cover and cook for about 25 minutes, or until the lentils are tender.

Uncover and cook for 5 minutes more, or until the mixture has thickened and the liquid has absorbed. Mash slightly with a fork and stir in the salsa.

Divide between the 12 tortillas and enjoy!

Nutrition Facts: 1 serving=2 tacos
266 calories, 4.4 g fat (.5 g saturated fat), 0 mg cholesterol, 307 mg sodium, 47 g carbohydrate, 1 g dietary fiber, 12 g protein

If you'd like to learn more about protein or protein foods, visit a registered dietitian and/or check out <http://www.choosemyplate.gov/food-groups/>



Mary Broe is a Registered Dietitian and recent graduate of WVU Healthcare's dietetic internship program. As the nation's food and nutrition experts, registered dietitians are committed to improving the health of their communities. To find a registered dietitian in your area, visit www.eatright.org and click on "Find a Registered Dietitian."