Protein

how much, how often, & what to buy

What is protein?

Protein is a nutrient primarily responsible for the recovery of body tissue: muscle, organs, skin, hair, nails, joints, ligaments, you name it. Your body has a baseline need for protein to keep it healthy and sustained. When part of your body is damaged or growing (like after a workout or an injury, for example), you need more protein than normal.

Where does protein come from?

Protein primarily comes from animal products (though there are plant sources - we'll get to those later).

- Meat (beef, venison, pork, lamb, etc.), fish, and poultry (chicken, turkey, etc.) are all common sources of protein that have the essential building blocks (amino acids) for muscle and other tissue repair.[1]
- Dairy products are also a massive contributor to protein intake, especially products like yogurt, cottage cheese, hard cheeses like aged cheddar or Parmesan, and whey protein powder.
- Eggs are also a fantastic source of protein, with the whites providing protein and the yolks containing healthy fats and vitamins.

Plant sources of protein include (though not a complete list): legumes (lentils, beans, and peas), grains (rice, quinoa), nuts and seeds, and soy products. Unfortunately, most non-animal protein sources do not contain all of the essential amino acids for tissue repair.[2] Although combining protein sources can help match up the amino acids needs (beans and rice together, for example), they still do not contain some vitamins necessary for health that are only found in animal proteins (like B vitamins). If you do not eat animal products, it may be a good idea to not only combine plant sources of protein for all of the essential amino acids, but also supplement in your diet with vitamins and minerals like B12, iodine, iron, riboflavin, vitamin D, zinc, and calcium.

How much protein do you need?

For a healthy individual, protein needs differ depending on age, biological gender, body composition/weight, and activity level.**

The new dietary guidelines suggest about 1.2-1.6 g of protein per kilogram of body weight.[3]

Example

To find kilograms, divide your weight in pounds by 2.2.

If you weigh 150 lbs, it is 150/2.2 = 68.2 kg. The recommended protein range would then be 68.2 x 1.2 = 82 g to 68.2 x 1.6 = 109 g. So, 82-109 g of protein per day.

This recommendation works as a rough estimate, but recognize that if you have a higher muscle mass that is contributing to your weight, you may need more.

Protein needs per day can quickly become confusing, especially when trying to decide how much to eat at once. Protein is metabolized differently from other nutrient types - when you eat protein, your body uses it for all its tissue-repairing needs.[1] But once those needs are fulfilled, your body does not store it as protein. Instead, it breaks down the protein into energy and waste.[4] So, how much protein can your body use at once?

For young women (who have not reached menopause), this is typically 20-25 grams per meal. 20-25 g/meal may be enough as a baseline, with more like 30 g needed after being active.
For men, 25-30 g/meal is a good baseline. Some can have more like 35-40 grams after an intense workout, or for those with greater muscle mass. [4]
However, this does not mean you can't have more protein in a meal. It just won't be used as protein by your body once your protein needs are met.

Protein Recommendations

Where to start:

Men: Eat 25-30 grams of protein per meal or snack 3-4 times a day. You'll likely hit your daily protein needs, and can have an extra serving of protein (30-40 g) after being active or intentionally working out.

Women: Eat 20-25 grams per meal or snack (20 g is fine for a snack or small meal to start). You may need more during the luteal phase of your cycle (about 10-15 g more). You'll want a 30 g serving of protein after exercise. Pregnancy, breastfeeding, and postpartum seasons also change your protein needs. [5]

Can you eat that much protein without breaking the bank?

Yes, but you have to be strategic. Below are a few cheap protein favorites you might try.

Eggs: So long as there is not a massive bird flu hiking up egg prices, these are affordable and packed with protein. They can even be cracked into a bowl of water, covered with a plate, and microwaved right in your dorm, making quick and easy poached eggs for toast.

Fish: Canned fish is rapidly gaining popularity, but if you aren't into sardines, tinned mackerel, tuna, and salmon are milder options. You can get tuna and salmon in easy packets that don't require any draining. Although canned, they maintain quality and are a great source of protein!

Yogurt & cottage cheese: can be sweet or savory. Add a bit of ranch seasoning, and you have a protein-packed dip to snack on while studying. Or, add a scoop of your favorite flavored protein powder and a handful of frozen berries for a sweet treat and plenty of protein.

Beans & lentils: You can add smaller portions of meat to a bowl of beans or lentils to make the dollar stretch and still get enough protein. Or, if not eating animal products, add these to a serving of rice.

What does a serving of protein look like?

- 4-6 oz piece of meat, fish, or poultry contains about 25 g of protein. It is approximately the size of a deck of cards.
- 1 cup of yogurt contains about 20 g of protein, and 1 cup of cottage cheese contains about 25 g of protein
- 1 cup of beans or lentils contains about 15-20 g of protein.
- 4 eggs contain about 25 g of protein

Visualizing it this way can help you see a rough estimate of how much protein you are getting without having to pull out the scale or look up every meal you eat on a macro-nutrient tracking app (although, those can be helpful when starting to gain a better visual).

**This article does not contain individualized care instructions and should not be used as medical advice. Talk to your doctor or dietitian if you have a medical condition that impacts your unique protein needs.

References:

1. Barr B, Levitt DE, Gollahon L. Red Meat Amino Acids for Beginners: A Narrative Review. Nutrients. 2025;17(6):939. Published 2025 Mar 7. doi:10.3390/nu17060939

2. Pinckaers PJM, Trommelen J, Snijders T, van Loon LJC. The Anabolic Response to Plant-Based Protein Ingestion. Sports Med. 2021;51(Suppl 1):59-74. doi:10.1007/s40279-021-01540-8

3. U.S. Department of Agriculture and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2025–2030. 10th Edition. USDA and HHS; January 2026. Accessed May 27, 2026. Dietary Guidelines for Americans

4. Schoenfeld BJ, Aragon AA. How much protein can the body use in a single meal for muscle-building? Implications for daily protein distribution. J Int Soc Sports Nutr. 2018;15:10. Published 2018 Feb 27. doi:10.1186/s12970-018-0215-1

5. Rasmussen B, Ennis M, Pencharz P, Ball R, Courtney-martin G, Elango R. Protein Requirements of Healthy Lactating Women Are Higher Than the Current Recommendations. Curr Dev Nutr. 2020;4(Suppl 2):653. Published 2020 May 29. doi:10.1093/cdn/nzaa049_046

6. Noori N, Sims JJ, Kopple JD, Shah A, Colman S, Shinaberger CS, Bross R, Mehrotra R, Kovesdy CP, Kalantar-Zadeh K. Organic and inorganic dietary phosphorus and its management in chronic kidney disease. Iran J Kidney Dis. 2010 Apr;4(2):89-100. PMID: 20404416