

SPECIAL FEATURE

Circle, Diabetes Australia

All about protein

High protein fad diets have been popular over the last few years for weight loss (think Paloe, Atkins, Dukin diets) but seem to be on the wane now. Making sure that you have enough protein, but not too much, is pretty straightforward but how important is protein for someone living with diabetes, and where is it found in our food? Dale Cooke, Accredited Practising Dietitian answers these questions.

How much protein do you need and why is too much not good?

Protein is made up of 16 percent nitrogen. Waste products from the body which include some nitrogen are processed through the kidneys. If your kidneys are not functioning as well as they should, then a high protein diet puts a lot more stress on them. If you have any kidney complications, talk to your renal health team for advice on how much protein to eat.

While there is no official upper limit for protein intake recommended in Australia, an adult needs about 0.8g of protein for every kilogram of body weight (that isn't very much). So a 75kg man would require 60g of protein each day and a 65kg woman would require 52g of protein a day. Again, that's not a lot.

Growing children, pregnant and lactating women and those over 70 years need more protein. Regular healthy eating advice would usually suggest having up to 25 percent of your total energy from protein. And if you supplement with protein, whey or amino acid drinks you shouldn't have more amino acids than that normally found in your diet.

If there is more protein in the diet than is needed then it's burnt as energy (think kilojoules or calories). The body doesn't like to store protein for use as energy, so if





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you eat way too much energy (kilojoules or calories) then the excess is converted to fat and stored. And, of course, we know that having too many fat stores isn't good for health!

Protein is less energy-dense than fat and alcohol.

- 1g of protein = 17kj
- 1g of carb = 17kj
- 1g of fat = 38kj
- 1g of alcohol = 29kj

Where do I find protein?

Most foods are made up of a mixture of protein, carbohydrate and fat (and water). Only purified oils contain all fat, and pure glucose contains all carbohydrate. Everything else is a mixture.

Proteins are found in animal and plant foods and both sources can provide all the amino acids the body needs.

Supplement drinks and sports protein supplements contains cow's milk, whey (from cow's milk) or soy protein which are a good source of protein for those who can't eat enough whole foods to keep up with their requirements.

In Summary

Enjoy protein-containing wholefoods in moderation every day. If in doubt, ask your diabetes health care team for advice specific for you.

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WHAT ABOUT PROTEIN AND DIABETES?

Choosing your food to include the right types and amount of protein can help you with your diabetes management.

- Protein slows down the digestion of carbohydrates so it is useful for lowering the GI (glycaemic index) of meals and snacks. That means your blood glucose levels stay steadier.
- Plant based proteins like peas, beans and legumes are brilliant as they contain protein and carbohydrate, are low GI and will help to lower your "bad" LDL cholesterol. So have a vegetarian meal at least once a week.
- A meal or snack which contains protein will make you feel more satisfied for longer. Being more satisfied with your meal means you aren't looking for extra snacks soon after eating which is great for weight management. This is the principle that underlies most of the high protein fad diets. If you are trying to lose weight include some protein containing foods at meals to fill you up but also ask your Accredited Practising Dietitian for advice tailored to your needs.
- In the average person's diet protein often comes packaged with fat, especially saturated fat from animal sources. To keep your "bad" LDL cholesterol in check it's wise to choose lean meat, poultry and dairy products.