

Q. Is it possible to get enough protein from a vegetarian diet?

A. Yes. You can get adequate protein from plant sources. In fact, many world-class athletes are vegetarians. For example, six-time Ironman World Champion Dave Scott is a vegetarian. He's dominated this sport by training hard and eating a plant-based diet. For Scott, protein is essential for the muscle strength needed to swim 2.4 miles, bike 112 miles, and run 26.2 miles. You can enjoy a protein-rich diet and be a vegetarian.

In a classic Swedish study, endurance athletes cut back on meat and dairy. They ate more plant-based foods. And their performance improved dramatically. We now know this has to do with "carbohydrate loading," a common practice among marathon runners. Runners tend to eat more like vegetarians before a race to improve their results.

But a plant-based diet is a healthy way to eat for anyone, not just athletes. You need protein to support the growth and repair of your muscles, skin, hair and bones, and other functions. And many plant-based foods are rich sources of protein.

Choose healthy protein foods

An average serving of soybeans contains just as much healthy protein as an egg. Soybeans also contain almost as much protein as red meat, but without the high levels of fat and artery-clogging cholesterol. You can also try soy-based foods like veggie patties, soymilk, and tofu. Other protein-rich legumes include pinto beans, black beans, garbanzo beans, and lentils.



Build meals around protein sources that are low in saturated fat. Eat more beans, nuts, seeds, lentils, brown rice, tofu, and nonfat dairy products. Don't overload meals with high-fat cheeses to replace meat. Limit yourself to no more than three egg yolks per week. And try meat-free versions of popular dishes like pasta primavera, tofu-vegetable stir-fry, bean burritos, or veggie lasagna.

Find out how much protein you need

Before you go on a plant-based protein binge, find out how much protein you really need for best health. The average adult should eat at least 0.4 grams of protein per pound of body weight (or 0.8 grams per kilogram). For example, a 175-pound man should eat about 64-70 grams of protein daily. A 150-pound woman would need to eat about 55-60 grams of protein daily.

Athletes and growing teenagers typically have greater protein needs. But you can get all the protein you need from plant-based foods. Calculate how much protein you should eat daily here: <http://tinyurl.com/axl3jlt>.

Power up with plant-based protein

Following a vegetarian diet and choosing plant-based proteins will benefit your health. You will avoid much of the saturated fat and cholesterol found in animal foods. And when you power up with plant-based proteins, you'll enjoy better health and fitness throughout your life.

Sources:

U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Harvard School of Public Health.

Journal of Nutrition.

