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## Getting enough protein

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### Summary

- Protein is an important nutrient that helps your body grow and repair cells.
  - Most Australians eat more than enough protein, but if you are vegetarian or vegan you may not be getting enough protein (or enough of the right type of protein).
  - The best way to get the right amount of protein – and the right type – is to eat a wide variety of protein rich foods as part of a balanced diet.
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**Protein** is a nutrient your body needs to grow and repair cells. It can also be an energy source, especially if you are not eating enough carbohydrates.

Your body needs enough of the right types of protein every day. And you may need more protein than usual during growth spurts (especially for children and teenagers), pregnancy and breastfeeding, or after an illness.

Most Australians eat far more protein than they need. But some people may not be getting enough. And if you are vegetarian or vegan, there is a higher chance that this might be you. Meat, poultry, fish, eggs and dairy are packed full of protein, but there are many plant-based foods that are a great source of protein too. You just need to plan your protein intake more carefully.

### The right amount of protein for you

How much protein should you eat every day? That's a good question. The [Australian Dietary guidelines](#) recommend that you eat 2–3 serves every day from the 'protein group'.

But a **more exact measure of your daily protein requirement** depends on your weight, age and height. As a rough guide:

- women need 0.75 grams per kilogram (so if you weigh 65 kilograms, you need 49 grams of protein every day)
- men need 0.84 grams per kilogram (so if you weigh 75 kilograms, you need 63 grams of protein every day).

And if you are pregnant, breastfeeding or over 70 years old, you need around 1 gram per kilogram. Protein requirements for children and teenagers change as they grow. You can find more detailed information by age and gender by visiting the Nutrient Reference Values page about [protein](#).

For more information about how much lean red meat and poultry to include in your diet, visit BHC's Meat and poultry page [[link to Meat and poultry](#)].

### Not all food proteins are the same

Protein is made up of amino acids. These amino acids are often referred to as building blocks because the small units are assembled in different sequences and lengths to build different proteins. So this means that different foods contain different proteins (even though they are all made up of amino acids).

There are 20 amino acids (or building blocks) and nine of these are called 'essential'. This is because your body cannot make them (although it can make the other 11).

Protein that comes from animal sources (that is, meat, poultry, fish, eggs and dairy products) is known as 'complete' protein (or ideal or high quality protein). It contains all the essential amino acids.

On the flip side, plant proteins (beans, lentils, nuts and whole grains) are considered 'incomplete' proteins. They are missing at least one of the essential amino acids. The only exception to this is soybeans, which are a complete protein.

What this means is that not all proteins are equal. And if you do not eat meat, poultry, fish, eggs or dairy, you have to manage your protein intake to make sure your body gets the full range of essential amino acids. But as long as you eat a wide variety of foods, you can usually make complete proteins.

### High protein foods

There are lots of foods that are packed full of protein. Some of them may be familiar, but others may not be so obvious:

- lean meats – beef, lamb, veal, pork, kangaroo
- poultry – chicken, turkey, duck, emu, goose, bush birds
- fish and seafood – fish, prawns, crab, lobster, mussels, oysters, scallops, clams
- eggs
- dairy products – milk, yoghurt (especially Greek yoghurt), cheese (especially cottage cheese)
- nuts (including nut pastes) and seeds – almonds, pine nuts, walnuts, macadamias, hazelnuts, cashews, pumpkin seeds, sesame seeds, sunflower seeds
- legumes and beans – all beans, lentils, chickpeas, split peas, tofu.

### Getting more protein into your day, naturally

If you're looking for ways to get more protein into your diet, here are some suggestions:

- Try a peanut butter sandwich! Remember to use natural peanut butter (or any other nut paste) with no added salt or sugar.
- Low-fat cottage or ricotta cheese is high in protein and can go in your scrambled eggs, casserole, mashed potato or pasta dish. Or spread it on your toast in the morning.
- Nuts and seeds are fantastic in salads, with vegetables and served on top of curries. Try toasting some pine nuts or flaked almonds and putting them in your green salad.
- Beans are great in soups, casseroles, and pasta sauces. Try tipping a drained can of cannellini beans into your favourite vegetable soup recipe or casserole.
- A plate of hummus and freshly cut vegetable sticks disappears quickly! Or spread hummus on your sandwich for an extra protein hit at lunchtime.
- Greek yoghurt is a protein rich food that you can use throughout the day. Dollop some on your favourite breakfast cereal, put a spoonful on top of a bowl of pumpkin soup or serve it as dessert with some fresh fruit.
- Eggs are a versatile and easy option. Better Health Channel has some good ideas on how to use **eggs** every day.

### Protein shakes, powders and supplements

If you're not getting enough protein in your diet, are protein shakes, powders and supplements a good idea? Unless you are exercising or training at the level of an athlete, the simple answer is probably not.

Most of us get more than enough protein through the food we eat. And any protein we eat on top of what our body needs will either be excreted from our body as waste, or stored as weight gain! Also, having too much protein on top of what our body needs can be damaging to our kidneys.

The best way for you to get the protein you need is to eat a wide variety of lean protein as part of a balanced diet. But if you are still interested in using protein shakes, powders and supplements, the best place to start is to talk to your doctor.

### The dangers of a high protein diet

Most Australians eat far more protein than they need. And there are some dangers associated with eating a high protein diet:

- Some protein-rich foods (like red meat and full-fat dairy products) may increase your risk of heart disease, as they are high in cholesterol-raising saturated fat.
- It is also thought that a diet high in red meat – particularly deli meats such as ham, bacon and salami – may increase your risk of bowel cancer.

- High protein diets often restrict your carbohydrate intake. And this can mean we miss out on important vitamins and minerals, and lead to problems associated with not getting enough fibre (such as bad breath, headache and constipation).
- And if you drastically reduce your carbohydrate intake, your body will go into a state called 'ketosis,' meaning it burns fat for energy rather than carbohydrate. While that sounds appealing, it often leads to side effects like moodiness, bad breath, difficulty concentrating, and low blood sugar levels. Your body may also start to convert protein into carbohydrates to feed the brain, and in the long term may also put you at risk of conditions like heart and kidney disease.
- A high protein diet may also adversely affect your kidney function if you have kidney disease.

**Remember...**

- Protein is an important nutrient that helps your body grow and repair cells.
- Most Australians eat more than enough protein. But if you are vegetarian or vegan, you may not be getting enough protein. Or you may not be eating enough of the right type of protein.
- The best way to get the right amount of protein – and the right type – is to eat a wide variety of protein rich foods as part of a balanced diet.

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Dietitians Association of Australia

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