High-Protein Diet

Understanding protein needs, food sources, muscle health, appetite and balanced eating

Protein is essential for growth, repair, enzymes, hormones, immune function and the maintenance of muscle and other tissues. A high-protein diet deliberately provides more protein than a person's usual intake, but 'more' is not automatically 'better'. Needs vary with body size, age, activity, health, pregnancy and clinical circumstances.

What counts as protein?

Animal sources	Plant sources
Eggs, poultry and lean meat	Beans, lentils and peas
Fish and seafood	Tofu, tempeh and soya foods
Milk, yoghurt and cheese	Nuts and seeds where safe
Other suitable animal foods	Quinoa, wholegrains and mixed plant foods

Protein quality and variety

Different foods provide different amino acids and micronutrients. Animal proteins generally contain all essential amino acids in useful proportions. Plant-based diets can also provide all essential amino acids through adequate total protein and a varied diet; foods do not have to be perfectly 'combined' at every meal.

How much?

UK adult reference intakes are commonly based around 0.75 g of protein per kilogram of body weight per day for healthy adults, but individual requirements can be higher in some circumstances. Athletes, older adults, people recovering from illness or injury and those with particular clinical needs may benefit from individual assessment.

High-protein does not mean protein-only

Vegetables, fruit, fibre-rich carbohydrate foods and healthy fats remain important. Removing entire food groups to make room for protein can reduce nutritional variety.

Muscle, Exercise, Ageing & Weight Management

Muscle maintenance

Muscle tissue is constantly being broken down and rebuilt. Adequate protein supplies amino acids for repair, while resistance exercise provides a powerful stimulus for maintaining and building muscle.

Spreading protein through the day

For many people it is practical to include a meaningful protein source at breakfast, lunch and dinner rather than relying on one very large evening portion. Older adults and active people may particularly benefit from considering both total intake and distribution.

Exercise and recovery

People who train regularly may have higher protein needs. Protein supports recovery, but carbohydrates also contribute to exercise fuel and glycogen restoration. A high-protein diet should not automatically become a low-carbohydrate diet.

Appetite and weight

Protein can be satiating and may help some people feel fuller. Higher-protein eating can therefore support weight-management plans for some adults, especially when it helps preserve lean tissue during weight loss. However, sustainable energy balance, food quality, sleep, activity and individual circumstances still matter.

Older adults

Ageing can be associated with loss of muscle mass and strength. Adequate protein alongside resistance or strength activity is important, but people with low appetite may struggle if very filling protein foods displace needed energy.

A balanced approach

Goal	Useful focus
Strength/muscle	Adequate total protein + resistance exercise + enough energy.
Recovery	Protein plus fluids, carbohydrate and overall nutrition.
Weight management	Protein-rich meals that remain varied, enjoyable and sustainable.
Healthy ageing	Regular protein opportunities, strength activity and adequate total intake.

Building Protein-Rich Meals

Breakfast

Eggs on toast with vegetables; yoghurt with fruit and seeds; porridge made with milk or fortified soya drink; tofu scramble; cottage cheese with suitable accompaniments. Breakfast does not need specialist protein products.

Lunch

Chicken, egg, tuna, tofu or bean salad; lentil soup with bread; hummus and falafel wrap; jacket potato with beans, tuna or cottage cheese; leftovers containing a clear protein source.

Dinner

Chicken or turkey with vegetables and rice/potatoes; tofu or tempeh stir-fry; lentil or bean chilli; fish with vegetables and grains; lean meat with a varied plate. Portion needs depend on the individual.

Snacks when useful

Yoghurt, milk, fortified soya drink, cheese, eggs, hummus, nuts or seeds where safe, roasted chickpeas or another tolerated protein-containing snack can help people who need more protein but cannot manage very large meals.

A simple meal framework

Component	Examples
Protein	Eggs, poultry, fish, tofu, tempeh, beans, lentils, dairy or suitable alternatives.
Produce	Vegetables and/or fruit for fibre, vitamins, minerals and variety.
Carbohydrate	Potatoes, rice, pasta, bread, oats, grains or another suitable source.
Fat	Olive/rapeseed oil, avocado, nuts/seeds where safe or oily fish.
Enjoyment	Flavours, sauces, textures and familiar foods that make eating realistic.

Protein powders

Powders can be convenient but are not necessary for most people. Whole foods provide protein alongside other nutrients. If using supplements, check ingredients, allergens and whether the product is appropriate for your health circumstances.

Vegetarian, Vegan, Budget & Everyday Practicalities

Vegetarian protein

Eggs and dairy can make protein easier to distribute where included. Beans, lentils, tofu, tempeh, soya mince, nuts, seeds and wholegrains can add further variety.

Vegan protein

Soya foods, tofu, tempeh, beans, lentils, peas, seitan where gluten is suitable, nuts and seeds can provide substantial protein. Total energy intake matters: eating too little food overall makes meeting protein needs harder.

Budget-friendly choices

Lower-cost option	Practical use
Eggs	Breakfasts, sandwiches, salads and main meals.
Beans/lentils	Soups, chilli, curries, pasta sauces and salads.
Tinned fish	Sandwiches, potatoes, pasta or salads.
Tofu/soya mince	Stir-fries, curries, chilli and bowls.
Milk/soya drink	Breakfast cereals, drinks and cooking.
Frozen/tinned foods	Reduce waste and provide convenient meal components.

Eating out

Most restaurants offer some form of protein source. Rather than trying to maximise protein at every opportunity, aim for a balanced meal that suits appetite and nutritional needs.

Convenience

Ready-cooked chicken, boiled eggs, tinned fish, prepared lentils, tofu, yoghurt and complete ready meals can reduce preparation demands. Convenience foods can be especially valuable when fatigue, disability or executive-function difficulties affect cooking.

Food safety

Higher intake of meat, fish, eggs or dairy makes safe storage, cooking and refrigeration important. Follow product instructions and UK food-safety guidance.

Kidney Health, ARFID, Allergies & Restrictive Eating

Kidney disease

People with chronic kidney disease may need an individually prescribed amount of protein depending on disease stage, dialysis and other factors. A self-directed high-protein diet can be inappropriate. Kidney teams and renal dietitians should guide intake.

Healthy kidneys

For healthy adults, protein intake within sensible evidence-based ranges is generally handled differently from the restrictions required in kidney disease. Extremely high intakes are not necessary to gain the benefits of adequate protein.

ARFID and sensory needs

Protein foods can have strong smells, variable textures or mixed consistencies. For someone with ARFID, the priority may be preserving reliable safe foods while gently identifying tolerated protein options. A nutrition target should not turn every meal into exposure therapy.

Food allergy and intolerance

Milk, egg, fish, shellfish, soya, peanuts and tree nuts are among common allergens and many are also popular protein foods. People with allergies need safe alternatives rather than simply being told to 'eat more protein'. Cross-contact and label reading may be important.

Eating disorders and gym culture

Protein targets can become rigid, particularly alongside calorie tracking, body checking or pressure to build muscle or lose fat. Anxiety about missing a protein target, replacing normal meals with supplements, or categorising foods as 'clean' and 'bad' can be warning signs that the plan is no longer supporting wellbeing.

Digestive comfort

Suddenly increasing protein while reducing fibre or fluids may contribute to constipation or digestive discomfort. Keep the whole diet in view.

Protein is important, but nutrition is not a single-nutrient project. Enough protein should sit alongside enough energy, fibre, carbohydrate, fats, vitamins, minerals and enjoyment.

Myths, Personal Check-In & Sources

Common myths

“More protein always means more muscle.” Muscle growth also requires an appropriate training stimulus and enough overall energy. **“You need protein shakes.”** Most people can meet needs through food. **“Plant protein is useless.”** False; varied plant foods can meet protein needs. **“High-protein means low-carb.”** These are separate choices. **“You must eat protein immediately after exercise.”** Total intake and regular distribution matter; the recovery window is not a few-minute deadline.

Personal check-in

- Why do I want to increase my protein intake?
- Am I eating enough overall, not just chasing a protein number?
- Do I include protein across the day in a way that suits my appetite?
- Am I still eating enough fibre-rich foods, vegetables, fruit and carbohydrates?
- Could ordinary foods meet my needs without expensive supplements?
- Do I have kidney disease or another condition requiring individual advice?
- Are allergies, ARFID or sensory needs limiting my protein choices?
- Are protein rules making food more anxious, rigid or compulsive?
- Does my eating pattern support energy, exercise, recovery and enjoyment?

A message from Space to Breathe Therapy

Protein can be a helpful part of feeling strong, nourished and supported, but you do not need to turn every meal into a calculation. Your needs are individual. A good eating pattern leaves room for enough protein alongside the many other things food gives us: energy, fibre, vitamins, comfort, culture, connection and enjoyment.

Evidence and further reading

NHS: balanced-diet and protein-food guidance within the Eatwell approach.

British Dietetic Association: evidence-based dietetic information on sports nutrition, protein and healthy eating.

British Nutrition Foundation: UK information on protein requirements, sources and healthy dietary patterns.

NICE / NHS kidney services: people with chronic kidney disease may require individual dietetic guidance, including protein advice.

Educational information only. This guide is not a personalised high-protein prescription and does not replace medical, renal or dietetic advice.