

MyPlate—The Protein Group: Go Lean With Protein

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INTRODUCTION

The protein group includes all meat, poultry, seafood, beans, peas, eggs, soy products, nuts, and seeds. MyPlate recommends that consumers eat a variety of foods from the protein group each week, including at least 8 ounces of seafood each week.



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Many foods in the protein group are high in fat and cholesterol. Although some seafood, nuts, and seeds are higher in fat, these foods also contain healthful oils and can be consumed in place of meat and poultry. Choosing lean meats and poultry and including healthful types of fat daily can help reduce your risk of heart disease. Be aware that the higher fat content of nuts, seeds, and some seafood can lead to the intake of more calories than you realize. Check your portion sizes for these higher-fat yet healthful foods.

Protein foods provide critical nutrients that are important for the repair and maintenance of the building blocks of the body. There are protein foods that are more nutritious than others and some that contribute to more positive health benefits than others.

NUTRIENTS IN THE PROTEIN GROUP

The following nutrients are found in most protein foods. A typical American diet may be at risk for being low in nutrients marked with an asterisk (*).

B vitamins release energy within the body, play an important role in metabolism, and help the nervous system work properly.

Vitamin E, an antioxidant, helps protect vitamin A and essential fatty acids from cell oxidation. Sunflower seeds, almonds, and hazelnuts are the richest sources of vitamin E in the protein group.

***Iron** is a mineral that carries oxygen in the blood to body cells and helps protect against infections. Iron deficiency often leads to anemia, which causes you to feel tired and weak. Many women develop iron-deficiency anemia during their childbearing years and may need more meat and beans in their diet.

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Table 1. Daily Recommendations for the Protein Group

	Age	Ounce equivalents
Children	2–3 years	2
	4–8 years	4
Girls	9–18 years	5
Boys	9–13 years	5
	14–18 years	6 1/2
Women	19–30 years	5 1/2
	31+ years	5
Men	19–30 years	6 1/2
	31–50 years	6
	51+ years	5 1/2

MyPlate uses the term “ounce equivalent” when suggesting amounts of protein foods to consume.

These amounts are appropriate for people who get less than 30 minutes per day of moderate exercise; those who are more physically active may be able to eat more than what is recommended in the table.

Magnesium builds strong bones and helps muscles release energy.

***Polyunsaturated fatty acids** (omega-3) and monounsaturated fatty acids help the body absorb and transport certain vitamins and help the body’s cells stay healthy. Omega-3 fats may reduce the risk of heart disease and can be found in varying amounts in seafood. Eating 8 ounces of seafood per week may help reduce the risk of heart disease.

Protein builds, repairs, and maintains all body tissues, including bones, muscles, cartilage, skin, and blood. It also helps to fight infections, is a good source of energy, and serves as building blocks for enzymes, hormones, and vitamins. Protein, carbohydrates, and fat are the three nutrients that provide calories.

Zinc helps the immune system function properly and is necessary for biochemical reactions.

HOW MUCH PROTEIN IS NEEDED?

MyPlate recommends that most adults should eat between 5 and 6 1/2 ounce equivalents of protein daily, depending on your age, gender, and level of physical activity (Table 1). For more information, visit www.choosemyplate.gov.

What counts as a protein ounce equivalent?

- 1 ounce of cooked meat, poultry, or seafood
- 1/4 cup of cooked dry beans or peas
- 1 egg
- 1 tablespoon of nut butter
- 1/2 ounce of nuts (12 almonds, 24 pistachios, 7 pecan or walnut halves)
- 1/2 ounce of seeds (pumpkin or sunflower)

- 1/4 cup of tofu (about 2 ounces)
- 1 ounce of cooked tempeh
- 1/4 cup of soybeans
- 2 tablespoons of hummus
- 1/2 cup of split pea, lentil, or bean soup

TIPS FOR HEALTHFUL EATING FROM THE PROTEIN GROUP

- Choose lean cuts of beef, such as ground round and ground chuck, that are lower in cholesterol and saturated fats.
- Remove the skin on poultry to lower cholesterol and saturated fat consumption.
- Eat unsalted nuts, seeds, beans, and peas.
- Eat unsalted sunflower seeds, almonds, and hazelnuts as good sources of vitamin E.
- Choose salmon, trout, and herring, which are high in omega-3 fatty acids.
- Limit products such as hot dogs, sausage, bacon, and deli meats that have added sodium.

TIPS FOR HEALTHFUL COOKING WITH PROTEIN GROUP FOODS

- Trim off all visible fat from meats and poultry before cooking.
- Use low-fat cooking methods—you can broil, grill, roast, poach, or boil meat, poultry, and seafood.
- Drain off any fat during and after cooking.
- Limit the breading on meat, poultry, and seafood—breading adds extra calories.
- Avoid adding fat when preparing beans and peas.
- Avoid prepared foods with high-fat sauces and gravies.

KEEP IT SAFE

- Keep raw, cooked, and ready-to-eat foods separate.
- Store raw meat, poultry, and seafood on the bottom shelf of the refrigerator so juices will not drip onto other foods.



- Wash cutting boards, knives, utensils, and countertops with hot, soapy water.
- Do not rinse meat or poultry because this can cause cross-contamination.
- To protect yourself and your family, use a food thermometer to make sure your food's internal temperature is high enough to destroy foodborne bacteria and other microorganisms. This is usually about 165°F. Cook foods to a safe temperature so microorganisms are killed.
- Defrost foods properly in a refrigerator or microwave. Never set food out on the counter to thaw.
- Refrigerate or freeze perishable foods within two hours.
- Avoid raw or partially cooked meat and eggs and foods containing raw or partially cooked eggs.

“GO, SLOW, WHOA” FOODS

An easy way to make smart and nutritious choices within the protein group is to use the “Go, Slow, Whoa” concept.

- **“Go”** foods are the most nutrient-dense; they contain more of the nutrients you need with relatively fewer calories. Eat them almost any time, based on your calorie needs.
 - Examples: trimmed beef or pork; extra lean ground beef, chicken, or turkey; chicken and turkey without skin; tuna canned in water; baked, broiled, steamed, or grilled fish or shellfish; beans, split peas, lentils, and tofu; egg whites and egg substitutes.

- **“Slow”** foods are higher in calories, fat, and/or sugar than “Go” foods. Eat them sometimes, at most several times a week. Nuts/seeds can be consumed each day, but in reasonable portion sizes.
 - Examples: lean ground beef, chicken, or turkey; broiled or grilled hamburgers; ham and Canadian bacon; chicken and turkey with skin; low-fat hot dogs; tuna packed in oil; nut butter; nuts/seeds; whole eggs cooked without fat.
- **“Whoa”** foods are high in calories, fat, and/or sugar and offer little nutritional value. Eat them only once in a while or on special occasions, and in small portions.
 - Examples: untrimmed beef or pork; regular ground beef, chicken, or turkey; fried hamburgers; ribs; bacon; fried chicken; chicken nuggets; hot dogs; lunch meats; pepperoni and sausage; fried seafood and shellfish; whole eggs cooked with fat.

To learn more about “Go, Slow, and Whoa” foods, visit <http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/public/heart/obesity/wecan/eat-right/choosing-foods.htm>

REFERENCES

- National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute. 2012. Choosing foods for your family: GO, SLOW, and WHOA foods [Online]. <https://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/educational/wecan/eat-right/choosing-foods.htm>
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