

Nutrition Lesson

Nonfiction

Source: Public Domain, adapted by Center for Urban Education, may be used with citation
Adapted from Eating Protein is Important by Mary L. Gavin, MD, public access
document, http://kidshealth.org/kid/stay_healthy/body/protein.html

People say, you need to eat protein, but what is it? Many foods contain protein. The best sources are beef, poultry, fish, eggs, dairy products, nuts, seeds, and legumes like black beans and lentils. Your muscles, your organs, and your immune system are made up mostly of protein.

Your body uses the protein you eat to make lots of specialized protein molecules that have specific jobs. For instance, your body uses protein to make hemoglobin. That is the part of red blood cells that carries oxygen to every part of your body. Other proteins are used to build cardiac muscle. What's that? Your heart! In fact, whether you're running or just hanging out, protein is doing important work like moving your legs, moving your lungs, and protecting you from disease.

Food from animals, such as meat and milk, is called complete. Most vegetable protein is incomplete. It does not give you as much protein as the animal foods. People who eat a vegetarian diet can still get what they need, they just need to eat a wide variety of protein-rich vegetable foods.

For instance, if you have peanut butter on whole-grain bread you're set. Likewise, red beans won't give you everything you need, but red beans and rice will do the trick. The good news is that you don't have to eat all you need in every meal. As long as you have a variety of protein sources throughout the day, your body will grab what it needs from each meal.

You can figure out how much protein you need if you know how much you weigh. Each day, kids need to eat about 0.5 grams of protein for every pound they weigh. That's a gram for every 2 pounds you weigh. Your protein needs will grow as you get bigger, but then they will level off when you reach adult size. Adults, for instance, need about 60 grams per day.

You can look at a food label to find out how many protein grams are in a serving. But if you're eating a balanced diet, you don't need to keep track of it. It's pretty easy to get enough protein.