

Protein is a crucial part of a sound diet

Figuring how much dietary protein you need is not always a simple calculation. Deciding whether to increase or decrease the amount of protein in your diet depends on a number of considerations.

Question: What factors determine a person's protein needs?

Answer: Body weight is the major factor. The Recommended Dietary Allowance (RDA) for adults is about 36 1/2 grams of protein per 100 pounds. This of course assumes that a person is healthy, not pregnant, lactating or elderly. It also assumes that the person is not on a weight-loss diet or involved in heavy exercise training.

The Institute of Medicine indicates that a wide range of protein intake above needs is compatible with good health.

Q: How much additional protein is needed during pregnancy

or lactation?

A: In order to have adequate protein for the increased needs of the woman and the growth of the infant, a woman needs 25 to 30 grams more protein per day.

Q: Do older people need less protein?

A: Research evaluating how to maintain adequate muscle indicates that protein needs increase in people older than 70. Presently, the RDA for protein does not increase for older people. Research indicates, however, that protein needs certainly do not decline with aging.

Q: How does dieting affect protein needs?

A: During weight loss, a person's protein requirement increases because protein is used to meet energy needs. According to research by Dr. Donald Layman at the University of Illinois, dieters need almost twice the RDA to prevent excessive loss of muscle.

Q: Do vegetarians need as much protein as meat-eaters?

A: If vegetarians don't properly combine protein foods with complementary amino acids, then they actually need more total protein than their meat-eating friends. A diet that does not contain milk products or eggs must contain plenty of legume foods such as beans, lentils, and tofu in combination with grains.

Q: How much protein is in foods?

A: There are about 7 to 8 grams of protein in an ounce of meat, fish, poultry, or cheese; a cup of milk or yogurt; a half-cup of beans or 3 ounces of tofu. To get an estimate of your protein intake, check food labels and visit a Web site such as www.calorieking.com.

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