

THE
EVERYTHING
HEALTHY
LIVING SERIES

Nutrition: Protein and Fats

*The most important information
you need to improve your health*



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The Everything® Healthy Living Series

Nutrition: Protein and Fats

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Introduction

For more than 10 years, millions of readers have trusted the bestselling Everything series for expert advice and important information on health topics ranging from pregnancy and postpartum care to heart health, anxiety, and diabetes. Packed with the most recent, up-to-date data, Everything health guides help you get the right diagnosis, choose the best doctor, and find the treatment options that work for you.

The Everything® Healthy Living Series books are concise guides, focusing on only the essential information you need. Whether you're looking for an overview of traditional and alternative migraine treatments, advice on starting a heart-healthy lifestyle, or suggestions for finding the right medical team, there's an Everything Healthy Living Book for you.

Nutrition

Food is everywhere. Every street has a restaurant, every event has a concession stand, and every commercial is dripping with cheese. Billboards, newspapers, and the Internet are constantly trying to sell you food. And you want to buy it. But is what's out there really something you need? Does it do your body any good? Is it making you healthy and strong? And what about the kids? How are they handling being inundated with constant food opportunities? Are they growing up healthy, lean, and fit? If they live in America, there's a good chance they aren't.

Poor nutrition is a growing problem in the United States. It's not that we don't have enough to eat. It's that we have too much of the wrong stuff to eat. You probably already know you should lay off the fast food and pick up an apple instead of that doughnut. But have you ever wondered what healthier foods could really do for you?

Did you know that eating the right carbohydrates can give you ongoing energy? Did you know that bright fruits and vegetables can help protect you against cancer? Did you know that eating right at an early age can protect kids from food allergies?

Food is fuel. It can be delicious fuel, but it can also be the wrong fuel. Like putting diesel fuel in a gasoline engine, people often choose the wrong food. Without the proper fuel and regular intervals throughout the day, you sputter and stall and will likely need a tuneup, or worse, a complete overhaul. Getting the right fuel is not mysterious, difficult, expensive, or time-consuming. *The Everything® Healthy Living Series: Nutrition* will show you exactly what, when, and how much you need to eat to get back on the road to good health.

Focusing on lifestyle changes instead of following a specific diet is the ticket to achieving optimal health, decreasing your risk of illness, increasing your energy level, improving your quality of life and well-being, and reducing your medications. In this series, you'll find everything you need to know to get your family on the road to life-long good health.

If you'd like to learn more about nutrition, check out *The Everything® Guide to Nutrition*, available in print (978-1-4405-1030-4) and eBook (978-1-4405-1159-2) formats.

The Power of Protein

Protein is one of the macronutrients and most important sources of calories to be consumed at each meal, including snacks. Its power to slow digestion and regulate blood sugars, hunger, and energy levels can improve your productivity and performance — and you won't need to take so many coffee breaks. This is especially true during that afternoon drop, when many of us reach for a quick fix of processed foods or “empty calories.” Luckily, we have plenty of protein sources from plants, animals, and dairy products to save us from malnutrition and help us reach our potential.

The Role of Protein in a Healthy Diet

Protein builds and maintains muscles, organs, connective tissues, skin, bones, teeth, blood, and your DNA (deoxyribonucleic acid). It helps the body heal when it is sick, wounded, or depleted. Without protein, even mild exercise would weaken you to the point of exhaustion.

Protein contributes to the formation of enzymes. Almost all reactions that occur in the body, such as digestion, require enzymes. Enzymes are catalysts to these reactions, increasing the rate at which they occur.

There is protein in your blood, called antibodies. They serve as your body's immune responders. They bind with and fight foreign invaders, such as bacteria or toxins. Protein is found in hormones, your body's chemical messengers. Hormones help regulate the body's activities, maintaining balance or homeostasis.

Amino Acids

Protein is composed of twenty amino acids. These acids link together in chains to form the variety of proteins your body needs. The length and shape of the chain determines the protein's structure. Of the twenty amino acids, eleven of them are made by your body. These eleven acids are

called nonessential because you do not need to consume them. The remaining nine amino acids are called essential, and it is important that you eat these every day. Getting all nine essential amino acids is not hard, especially if you eat meat. Animal foods (which include meat, eggs, and dairy products) contain the largest concentration of protein. Animal protein is considered complete, because it contains all nine essential amino acids.

Essential

Eating complementary protein means consuming both beans and grains every day. The beans can be pinto, kidney, black, lentils, garbanzo, split peas, or peanuts. Grains should be whole, including brown rice, whole-wheat pasta, bread, crackers, or tortillas. Sesame seeds also complement the protein of beans.

Plant foods also contain proteins, but few plants contain complete protein. This is one of the challenges of vegetarianism, because to stay healthy you must consume enough foods with the right mixture of amino acids. It sounds complicated, but grains, nuts, and legumes contain the proteins that are not found in other plants, so adding a variety of these to your diet does the trick.

Plant foods eaten in combination to create complete protein are called complementary proteins. When these foods are eaten over the course of a day, protein intake is complete. Protein derived from complementary plant proteins is considered a healthy alternative, and by many people, a superior one. Eating such combinations of plant foods not only completes the protein, but also provides other nutrients vital to good health as well, most notably fiber, vitamins, and minerals. And most plants do all that without saturated fat.

Cooking Protein

Cooked protein is also referred to as denatured. When denatured, protein changes its structure and stops functioning. In denaturation, the

amino acids loosen, recoil, and tighten, which changes the appearance, texture, and flavor of the protein. If you watch an egg being cooked, you can see the denaturation happen within a minute or two as the albumen turns white.

Cooking protein does not necessarily require heat. Acid will denature protein, as it does in the Latin American dish ceviche, in which seafood is marinated in lime. Salt is used to cook protein in cured meats, such as ham, sausages, and salt cod. Pickled meats combine acid and salt for a double-whammy cooking method. Even agitation can denature protein, as in the whipping of eggs. In this case prolonged agitation changes the egg's structure, making it safe to eat. Meringue demonstrates this effect on the egg white, while yolks and whole eggs get this treatment in mayonnaise and emulsified salad dressings, such as those used in Caesar salad.

Fact

Denaturation of protein doesn't happen only in the kitchen. You saw it during your last visit to the beach. The waves break onto the sand, the tide rolls in and out, and that motion denatures the proteins in the seawater, creating sea foam.

Choosing Your Protein

People in the United States overconsume animal protein. To stay healthy and rebuild muscle, the average adult needs only five to six ounces of complete protein each day. But a typical American diet consists of bacon and eggs for breakfast, a meat-filled sandwich for lunch, and a dinner featuring meat as its focus. A healthy family needs a healthy diet of lean protein in moderation. Animal proteins are higher in fat, particularly saturated fat, which in turn makes them high in cholesterol. Plant foods, however, contain no cholesterol, less fat (in the form of plant oil), and lots of fiber.

Eating too little protein is not healthy, but neither is eating too much. Overeating protein does not build extra muscle. The protein your body does not utilize is stored as fat.

Meat

Meat is a common generic term meaning flesh, but to chefs it refers specifically to the flesh of four-legged domesticated animals. This includes mainly beef, lamb, and pork. Lamb is becoming popular in America, and pork is gaining in popularity as a lean meat option. But by far, the favorite meat in the United States is beef.

Historically, the cow's size made it more valuable as a draft animal than a source of food. The logistics of slaughtering such a large animal were daunting. Salting was the main method of preserving meat, and this method was not very sophisticated. So, unless there was a real crowd to feed, lamb was a more popular choice. But modern Americans love what cows offer. The cow's meat, milk, and hide easily make it the world's most important domesticated animal.

Choosing Beef

Beef and veal are readily available in modern supermarkets, and for the most part, quality is high. The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) grades meat for consumption based on muscle-to-bone and fat-to-muscle ratios. Beef grades, from best to worst, are prime, choice, and select. Lesser grades, used mainly for processed meat products, include standard, commercial, and utility. Grades are stamped in purple on the outer carcass of the animal, and are usually prominently advertised by retailers, especially when the grade is high.

Beef cows are taken to market when they are between eighteen and twenty-four months of age. Before that time the cow is considered veal. Veal is a male dairy cow between sixteen and eighteen months of age.

Veal grades, from best to worst, are prime, choice, good, standard, and utility.

The Disadvantages of Meat

Meat is generally considered a high-fat protein choice. Usually fat means flavor. In today's world people appreciate, and even expect, a high level of flavor in their meat, despite full knowledge that saturated fat contributes to coronary artery disease and elevated cholesterol levels.

Lean cuts are available, but even if you cannot see the fat marbled throughout a particular cut, the saturated fat is still present within the muscle cells. When meat is heated, the fat melts and penetrates the muscle. So even if you do not eat the visible fat on a steak, you are consuming saturated fat.

This appetite for fatty beef has drastically changed the landscape of modern agriculture. Today cattle are bred and raised to provide the most meat with the least cost. According to the USDA, the average American consumes sixty-seven pounds of beef every year.

A wild cow would naturally consume fiber-rich plants that are unsuitable for human consumption. Today, cows compete with humans for food, consuming grain grown on valuable fertile soil. In the United States, half of the water and 80 percent of the grain harvested goes to feed livestock.

Poultry

Poultry is a term used to describe domesticated birds raised for food. In the United States this means mainly chicken and turkey. Game hens are another form of poultry that can be found in some supermarkets. Duck, although common in Europe and Asia, appears more often on restaurant menus than in your average American grocery store.

Most supermarkets offer organic, free-range, and natural birds. Free-range chickens have more flavor because they are allowed to exercise a bit

more. Natural birds contain nothing synthetic, no preservatives or artificial flavoring or colorings, but standards permit antibiotics and hormone use. Organic birds are fed grains that have not been exposed to chemicals and pesticides. They may not be treated with antibiotics or drugs, and must be allowed to go outside and exercise.

Alert

Whenever possible, buy free-range, organic poultry. Common chickens are raised with profit, not health, in mind. They must be fed antibiotics to fend off disease. They are given growth hormones, which, coupled with lack of exercise, makes them so fat they cannot move. In addition, the food they are fed is grown with artificial fertilizers and chemical pesticides.

Kosher chickens are organic and free-range, and are processed under the strict supervision of a rabbi. They are also soaked in salty brine, which gives them a unique flavor.

When shopping for chickens, frugal cooks know that whole chickens are always less expensive than cut-up parts. But unless you possess good butchering skills, it can be worth paying a little more. Keep in mind that chicken fat occurs in and around the skin, which is easy to remove.

Seafood

Seafood is the most abundant source of protein on earth. Consider all the varieties, around the world, and it's an immense category of food. Narrowed down to its basic parts, the world of seafood is easy to navigate. Seafood is a name given to all marine animals caught or raised for food. This includes both fresh and saltwater species. People tend to condense them all into a general category of fish, but there are many subcategories.

Fish Groups

Fish is first divided into two basic types: finfish and shellfish. There are two kinds of finfish: flat fish and round fish. The flat fish, which

include flounder, halibut, and sole, skim along the bottom of the sea. Round fish (which only appear round if they are swimming straight toward you) are found in both freshwater and saltwater. Freshwater fish have much smaller bones than their larger, oceangoing cousins. Shellfish are also separated into two categories: mollusks, such as mussels and clams, and crustaceans, which include crabs, lobsters, crayfish, and shrimp.

Choosing Fish

If you are lucky enough to live near the sea, you will likely have an abundance of fish at your market. Further inland, your fish selection may be more limited. Luckily, frozen fish today are of very high quality, as they are flash-frozen on board the ship that caught them.

When buying frozen fish, be sure it is free of ice, which is a sign that it has been defrosted and refrozen. The fish should have a natural shape, with only a light coating of frost. Defrost frozen fish slowly, twenty-four to thirty-six hours in the refrigerator is best. Place defrosting fish in a colander or perforated pan to separate the runoff juices. Smaller pieces can be cooked frozen.

When buying fresh fish, be sure that all you smell is fresh, oceanic fish. If the smell is off-putting, don't buy it. When you get the fish home, store it in the fridge loosely covered with paper, preferably in a perforated pan to allow juices to drain away. If you plan to store the fish longer than two to three days, it should be frozen.

Eggs

The nutritional value of eggs cannot be denied. They are loaded with protein and are, as such, used as a measure for other proteins. What's more, they contain almost every essential vitamin and mineral humans need.

Egg yolks contain a high percentage of cholesterol, and people watching their cholesterol should avoid them. But normal, healthy, active

humans can, and should, benefit from the incredible egg.

Choosing Your Eggs

When possible, look for organic eggs from free-range chickens. They are regulated to a certain extent by the USDA. No antibiotics or hormones are allowed, and the birds are provided with access to the outdoors. Eggs have a tremendous shelf life. By the time they get to your grocer, they are usually one or two weeks old. They will last in your fridge another three weeks. The shell, which is very porous, allows odor and moisture to pass through. Over time, the yolk and white become thinner. Thicker, fresher egg whites and yolks are preferable for recipes that require the eggs to be whipped.

Beans

The general term bean encompasses several plants and usually refers to the legume, a large plant seed found within long pods from the plant family Fabaceae. Soybeans, peas, lentils, and kidney beans are examples of legumes. When the seeds are dried, they are referred to as pulses. Many beans are only sold in dry form, although some, such as the pea, come both dried and fresh.

Beans are an excellent source of low-fat protein, containing more than twice the amount of protein as grain. You can buy beans in dried or canned form. Dried beans take longer to cook, and must first undergo a long soaking process to tenderize them. Canned beans are readily available, which makes it easy to add beans into your everyday diet. Most supermarkets stock such common beans as adzuki, black, broad bean, cannellini, chickpeas, fava, garbanzo, kidney, lentil, lima, mung, navy, pea, pinto, runner, soy, and white.

Nuts

Botanically, a nut is a fruit with one seed. The wall of the seed becomes very hard, and the meat of the seed stays very loose within. Walnuts,

pecans, hazelnuts, and chestnuts fall into this category. However, in the world of cuisine there are other nuts that do not fit the definition. Peanuts are legumes, the pine nut is a seed from a pine tree, a macadamia nut is a kernel, and the Brazil nut is found inside a fruit capsule.

Nuts have a high oil content and can easily become rancid if stored improperly. Heat and light increase rancidity, so refrigeration is best for long-term storage. Flavor is greatly altered, and generally improved, by heat. Toasting nuts in an oven yields the best results. Spread them out on a baking sheet and roast at 350°F for 10–15 minutes, until they become fragrant.

Fats and Oils

These essential nutrients are not “empty” calories in your diet. They not only flavor foods, they also provide a sense of fullness and are necessary in absorbing fat-soluble vitamins and minerals. Unfortunately, some fat sources are detrimental to your health. But if you equate “fat” with “bad,” you’re out of the loop, so let’s reel you back in to the benefits of natural energy sources.

What Is Fat, and Why Do You Need It?

Fat is necessary for good health, but not in the quantities most Americans consume it. You need it to transport fat-soluble vitamins, insulate you in winter, and cushion falls or other types of impact to your body. For good health, however, it’s important to understand and choose the right kind of fat.

Fat is a macronutrient, providing you with a concentrated source of energy and vital calories. The chemical name for this group of nutrients is lipids, and it includes fat, oil, and lecithin. Lipids are found in both plants and animals. In general, when stored at room temperature, fat is solid and oil is liquid.

Essential

Lecithin is a natural emulsifying agent, which means it can help combine two ingredients that don’t naturally combine, such as oil and water. The lecithin in an egg yolk is what lets you emulsify mayonnaise and thicken salad dressings. Soy-derived lecithin is used in hundreds of products, including chocolate.

Fatty Acids

Fatty acids are the building blocks of fat. They are linked together in long chains of carbon and hydrogen atoms. If a fatty acid chain is filled to capacity with hydrogen atoms, it is called saturated. This fat is thick, like butter.

If hydrogen is missing, it is called unsaturated. The amount of missing hydrogen determines whether the fat is monounsaturated or polyunsaturated. This type of fat is thin, as in oil.

All fat, including the fat you find in food, is made of a mixture of saturated and unsaturated fats. The majority of the fat a food contains determines its classification as saturated or unsaturated.

Fat is difficult for your body to digest and utilize because fat and water do not mix. Bile is the key to your utilization of fat. Made by the liver and secreted by the gallbladder, bile can break the triglycerides into their components — fatty acids and glycerol — for absorption.

Saturated Fats

This type of fat is found mainly in animal-based foods. It can easily be identified, because the foods are solid at room temperature. You'll find saturated fat in meat, butter, cheese, and lard.

These are the most dangerous types of fat because they appear to raise blood cholesterol levels. They may inhibit the liver's ability to clear out low-density lipoproteins (LDL) and actually stimulate their production. The result is an increased likelihood of atherosclerosis and coronary artery disease.

Saturated fats are seldom found in plants. The exceptions are palm oil and coconut oil. These plants contain a large amount of saturated fatty acids, which are solid at room temperature. They are free of trans fat, and as such are often encouraged for use in place of hydrogenated oils. Additionally, they are easier for your body to absorb than trans fat.

Unsaturated Fats

These fats are liquid at room temperature. Generally referred to as oils, they come mainly from plant sources. These fats have a short shelf life, and are likely to spoil.

There are two types of unsaturated fats: monounsaturated and polyunsaturated. Monounsaturated fats occur in olive, canola, and nut oils, including peanut oil. Polyunsaturated fats include plant oils such as safflower, sunflower, cottonseed, sesame, corn, and soybean. Unsaturated fats have been shown to actually lower the low-density lipoproteins (LDL) in your blood.

The only animal oil that is not saturated is polyunsaturated fish oil. These oils contain healthy omega-3 fatty acids and are an essential part of a healthy diet. If you do not eat fish at least twice a week, it's a good idea to take fish oil supplements to ensure you're getting your omega-3s.

Fact

When fat spoils it is called rancid. Oxygen and light are the main culprits in shortening fat's shelf life. Foods that contain fat should be refrigerated if intended for long-term use.

Trans Fat

This is the worst kind of fat. Trans fat has been shown to both lower the good cholesterol in your body and raise the bad. Not a healthy prospect. To make matters worse, in recent years trans fats have been used extensively in manufactured foods.

To make hydrogenated fat, extra hydrogen is added to unsaturated vegetable fat. Trans fats and partially hydrogenated fats are listed on labels.

Because trans fats are artificially saturated, the molecular chains are not straight like natural saturated fats, so they do not line up and pack together tightly. You can see this by comparing the way butter (which has no trans fat) and margarine (which is pure trans fat) spread when chilled.

What Is Cholesterol?

Cholesterol is a type of lipid found in the cells of all body tissues. It is not considered essential because your body makes it in the liver. It is a fatty substance, but unlike fat, it does not provide you with energy. You can't taste it or smell it, but it is in the food you eat, and your body needs it to function properly.

Every cell in your body contains cholesterol. Cholesterol carried in your bloodstream is called blood serum cholesterol. It is transported by blood plasma throughout the body and is used to make cell membranes, bile acids that allow us to digest fats, hormones, and vitamin D. Like so many things, too much cholesterol can be dangerous.

When it is in your food it is called dietary cholesterol. Found mainly in animals, you get lots of it in shrimp, egg yolks, dairy products, and meat.

LDL and HDL

Because fat does not dissolve in water, it is transported through the bloodstream by water-soluble proteins called lipoproteins. They wrap the cholesterol and triglycerides like a package and deliver it throughout the body. From the liver, triglycerides and cholesterol are secreted into plasma, where they are joined with low-density lipoprotein (LDL).

Termed the “bad cholesterol,” LDL is thought to increase the risk of heart disease, heart attacks, and stroke. Healthy blood has fairly few large particles of LDL. If too many accumulate, problems occur. When LDL accumulates on the walls of the arteries it can harden them and cause blockage. This is called arterial plaque. If blockage occurs in a main heart artery, a heart attack is the result. If blockage occurs in a major brain artery, stroke can result.

High-density lipoproteins (HDL) circulate in the blood, picking up cholesterol and excess plaque and transporting it back to the liver, where it is excreted as bile. For optimal health, levels of LDL should be low, and

levels of HDL should be high. Your cholesterol levels can be determined by a blood test. Healthy ratios of total cholesterol to HDL should be below 5:1.

Lowering Your Cholesterol Level

Cholesterol is measured in milligrams per deciliter of blood (mg/dl). When measuring LDL, 130 milligrams per deciliter is considered good, 160 is high. If you have heart disease, your target is 70 mg/dl.

In women, the target level range for HDL is 50–60 milligrams per deciliter. Men should aim for 40–50. Lower levels are considered risky.

When planning your diet, keep your saturated fat intake low. It should never constitute more than 10 percent of your total fat intake.

Polyunsaturated Fatty Acids: The Omegas

Omega-3 and omega-6 are essential fatty acids, which means you need them for good health, but your body cannot manufacture them. The name of these acids is an indication of where along the fatty acid chain (the “E” tail) hydrogen atoms are missing.

Fact

Flaxseeds are primarily used to make linseed oil, but they are also marketed in health food stores. Look for them near the grains, and add them to pilafs, salads, cereals, and breads.

Omega-3 is found in fish oil and plant oils, especially flaxseed oil. It is believed to reduce inflammation, improve blood circulation, and decrease the thickness of arterial walls, a significant benefit to people with high blood serum cholesterol. Omega-6 is found in nuts, whole grains, legumes, sesame oil, and soy oil. When used together to replace saturated fats, these fatty acids can reduce high blood pressure and cholesterol.

Cooking with Fats

Fats are an important part of cuisine. They carry flavor throughout a recipe, and bind and emulsify ingredients. The key to healthy cooking is knowing which fats to use.

Oils

Oil is an essential part of a salad. Without oil, the dressing would slip off the lettuce and pool at the bottom of the bowl. Just think about the way oil feels when it gets on your hands. Oil spreads flavor throughout a recipe like it spreads on your hands. You need it in recipes, but you don't need much.

Whenever possible, use mainly monounsaturated oils, which contribute to high-density lipoproteins. Olive and peanut oils are good choices. They have fairly distinctive flavors and can easily overpower a dish, so use a light hand. If a neutral oil is called for, canola is a good monounsaturated choice.

Fats

Like oil, fats are added to recipes to tenderize, moisten, and prolong shelf life. Because fats change their consistency when heated, the temperature indicated in the recipe is important.

The most frequent fat used for baking is butter. Unsalted butter is preferred by most bakers and chefs for its superior flavor. The lack of salt also gives the cook control over the amount of salt in a recipe. Salted butter can always be detected, as it makes the dish saltier than necessary. If you have no choice but to use salted butter, you should omit or reduce the amount of salt in the recipe.

Fact

The USDA suggests that you consume no more than 7 teaspoons of fat and oil each day. This includes not just the added butter on your baked potato but also the fats and oils found naturally in foods as well as those added to prepared foods.

Margarine is never a good choice. Its flavor is inferior, and because it is typically a trans fat, it is an unhealthy food. Also, its higher melting point leaves behind an unpleasant aftertaste. Because vegetable fats do not melt at body temperatures, as animal fats do, margarine coats the tongue and lingers on the palate long after the food is swallowed.

Butter, although a saturated animal-based fat, is preferable to margarine in maintaining a healthy diet. However, problems occur with any saturated fats when eaten in excess, so consume butter (and all fats) in moderation.

Like butter, lard is preferable to margarine. Lard is less popular today than in the past, but it is often preferred by bakers, especially for pie dough. It creates a superior flakiness that cannot be achieved with butter or shortening, and because it is an animal product, it leaves behind no unpleasant aftertaste. It is generally rendered from pork, although in other parts of the world it is made from other animal fats, too.

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