



PROTEIN POWER

Fight back against age-related muscle loss with nutrition and strength training

MATTHEW SOLAN | Harvard Health Publishing

Age-related muscle loss, called sarcopenia, is a natural part of aging. On average, adults can lose 4 to 6 pounds of muscle per decade. Strength training and protein are two ways to build muscle mass and combat sarcopenia. With strength training, many experts recommend progressive resistance training, where you gradually amp up your workout volume — weight, reps and sets — as your strength and endurance improve.

This constant challenge builds muscle and helps pre-

vent plateaus where you start losing the gains. (Enlist a personal trainer to help you set up a detailed sequence and supervise your initial workouts to ensure you perform the exercises safely.)

Muscles also need fuel, and that's where protein comes in. The body breaks down dietary protein into amino acids, which it uses to build muscle.

“(People) need adequate protein in their diet to increase and maintain muscle mass as well as assist their body when it must recover from surgery or injuries,” says Dr. Frank Hu, a professor of nutrition and epidemiology with Harvard’s T.H. Chan School of Public Health.

Protein by the numbers

Despite this need, there's a good chance some people aren't getting their optimal daily protein intake, especially if they also are cutting calories to lose weight.

The Recommended Dietary Allowance (RDA) of protein is 0.8 gram per kilogram of body weight, or about 0.36 gram per pound. For a 180-pound person, that is approximately 65 grams of protein per day.

According to many experts, most Americans meet and even exceed this amount. Still, some estimates suggest that approximately 10% to 25% of older adults consume less than the RDA.

A review of current research published in the June 2023 issue of The Journals of Gerontology: Series A suggested older adults may benefit from consuming 1 to 1.6 grams of protein per kilogram of body weight daily (about 82 to 130 grams for a 180-pound person) to help increase muscle strength.

However, according to Hu, you should be careful about consuming very high amounts per day — 2 grams per kilogram of body weight or more.

“Some studies have shown that too much protein is associated with an increased risk of chronic diseases and mortality,” he says.

The best sources

The first step to merging protein with strength training is to get a realistic estimate of how much protein you consume daily.

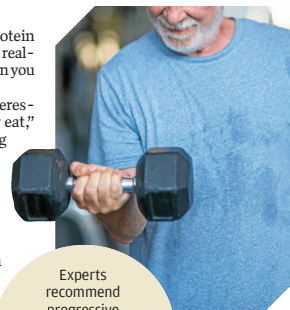
“People tend to over- or underestimate how much they actually eat,” Hu says. He suggests tracking your protein intake with each meal for a week to get a daily average. “Make sure to read labels and assess your protein per serving as accurately as possible, and don't guess at amounts.”

Once you have a general idea of your usual intake, you can increase it as needed. Hu recommends that your protein should focus on high-quality food sources, such as lean poultry, fish, dairy and plant-based foods, such as soy, legumes, nuts and whole grains.

Some people might need to avoid common high-protein food sources such as meat, eggs or dairy due to health concerns or dietary restrictions.

Here are some examples of how much protein you can get from typical servings of high-quality protein foods:

- 3.5 ounces lean chicken (31 grams)
- 3.5 ounces salmon (24 grams)
- 1 cup cooked beans (about 18 grams)
- 6 ounces plain yogurt (17 grams)
- 1 cup skim milk (9 grams)



Experts recommend progressive resistance training when trying to build muscle mass.

- 1/4 cup nuts (7 grams)
- 1 egg (6 grams)

Another option is whey protein powder or vegan powders made from soy, peas or brown rice. The exact amount of protein per serving varies by brand. Powders are a useful choice if you have trouble getting enough protein from foods. They can be added to oatmeal and smoothies or stirred into a glass of water.

“Because powders come with measuring scoops, they can help you track how many protein grams you add to your daily diet,” Hu says.