Muscle, Protein and Healthy Aging

The average older adult only eats enough protein at dinner to promote the building of muscle protein.

What is Sarcopenia?

Sarcopenia is the age-related loss of muscle and muscle weakness causing limits in movement that affects function. It is when we begin losing lean muscle from our body after age 30. It affects about 20% of people in their 60s and 70s and nearly 50% of people over the age of 80. Muscle strength declines by 1.5% a year in individuals ages 50 to 60 and then 3% annually from age 60 onward. Loss in muscle mass can affect a person’s mobility and independence.

If we can maintain or improve our muscles early, especially for people with diseases like diabetes, congestive heart failure, and COPD, people will function better, be less likely to fall, have fewer hospital visits, and be less likely to die. Maintaining muscle mass and strength is important for older adults because strength is linked to loss of life. There are simple ways to maintain muscle mass, or slow muscle loss as people get older.

Aim for a higher protein diet. Studies show that eating a higher protein diet may preserve muscle mass as we age. Studies suggest 25 to 30g of protein per meal and spacing the protein intake evenly during the day.

Incorporate exercise. Research has shown that exercise is beneficial to help slow muscle loss associated with aging. Consuming 40 grams of protein after resistance exercise (using weights or your body weight) has been shown to effectively increase muscle protein. Recommended: moderate intensity aerobic exercise (such as walking, cycling, stair climbing, swimming and dancing) at least three days per week (aim for 2½ hours per week) and strengthening exercise (lifting weights, stretching bands or using your body as a weight) at least two days a week.

A vitamin D3 supplement (cholecalciferol) may be recommended (800 IU or more per day) to improve muscle strength and increase calcium absorption for stronger bones can reduce the risk of falls.

Attention Senior Citizens:

Have a nutritional question or concern? If you are participating in services offered by Schenectady County’s Senior and Long Term Care services, you are eligible to have a free consultation with a Registered Dietitian. Call Cornell Cooperative Extension, Schenectady County at 518-372-1622, ext. 269. Leave a message, if necessary, for dietitian to call you back.

Consumer-centered access for long-term care information, referrals and assessments. For information, call 382-8481, #9, ext. 304

Schenectady County Department of Senior and Long Term Care Services denies no person services or access to service based upon race, color, sex, religion, national origin, marital status and/or handicapping conditions. Schenectady County Department of Senior and Long Term Care Services is primarily funded with County tax dollars. Supplemental funding is through the New York State Office for the Aging under Title III-B/D, III-C-1, III-C-2, III-E of the Federal Older Americans Act, and New York State Expanded In-Home Services for the Elderly (EJSEP), Community Services for the Elderly Act (CSE), Congregate Services Initiative (CSI), and the Wellness In Nutrition (WIN).

Building Strong and Vibrant New York Communities

Cornell Cooperative Extension is an employer and educator recognized for valuing AA/EOE, Protected Veterans, and Individuals with Disabilities and provides equal program and employment opportunities.
Protein sources
High biological value proteins or “complete proteins” are generally of animal origin (meats, fish, and dairy). They contain ideal quantities of essential amino acids. Amino acids (the building blocks of proteins) stimulate skeletal-muscle growth. The amino acid leucine is particularly important for muscle growth. Foods high in leucine include cheese, soybeans, beef, chicken, pork, nuts, seeds, fish, seafood, and beans.

Whey protein powder (whey is a protein from cow’s milk) is a supplement often used by body builders. It can be purchased ready to drink or as a powder to add to foods and beverages. Eggs are an inexpensive and easy protein food to eat and are no longer avoided concerning “dietary cholesterol.”

Most plant foods, with the exception of soy, quinoa, and spinach, may be low in one or two of the essential amino acids, but you can get enough of all these amino acids by including a variety of whole plant foods in your diet. It was once thought that plant proteins needed to be combined within a meal by mixing grains and legumes to create a “complete” protein with good amounts of all essential amino acids. We now know that the liver can store the amino acids so we don’t have to combine them in one meal. Legumes, which include beans, lentils, and dried peas, and soy, nuts and seeds, are rich sources of protein, but whole grains and vegetables contain protein, too.

Protein amounts in common foods:

Meats, poultry, fish, cheese: 3 oz. = 21 grams
Egg: 1 = 7 grams
Beans and lentils: 1/2 cup = 7 grams
Nuts and seeds: 1 oz. = 7 grams
Peanut butter: 1 Tbsp. = 7 grams
Milk: 1 cup = 8 grams
Cottage cheese: 1/4 cup = 7 grams
Greek yogurt: 6 oz. = 12 grams
Regular yogurt: 1/2 cup = 6 grams

Check the nutrition facts label for protein amounts too!

Some milk beverages, such as almond and rice milks, have little protein. Soy milk may have 5-6 grams protein per cup.

If you want a cereal that is a good source of protein, choose one with at least 6 grams of protein per serving. Check the serving sizes, too, as some claim more protein but that is for a larger serving.

Lunch and Dinner Menu
Generally include the same type and amount of foods as follows:
2-3 oz. meat or alternate (14-21 grams protein)
1-3 servings bread and/or grain (2-6 grams protein)
1-3 servings (1/2 cup each) vegetables (2-6 grams protein)
1 cup low fat milk (8 grams protein)
1-2 servings (1/2 cup each) fruit (no protein)
1-2 servings healthy fats and oils (no protein)

Sample breakfast menus (add fruit to complete)
2 scrambled eggs 1 hard boiled egg 1/2 cup oatmeal cooked with 1 cup milk
6 oz. Greek yogurt 1 oz. low-fat cheese 2 tablespoons walnuts
1/4 cup granola 1-2 slices toast 1/4 cup cottage cheese
1 cup low-fat milk

HO - Protein and Healthy Aging—August 2016