Complete Protein

Protein is everywhere but it is important to understand that not all protein is equal especially for the vegetarian. Animal foods provide complete proteins, which makes it easy for those eating omnivorously to get adequate protein in their diets. For vegetarians, though, getting the right amount of protein and essential amino acids requires a bit more thought.

Know What Proteins Do

Proteins, along with carbohydrates and fats, make up the bulk of our diet. We tend to think of proteins as body builders, and they are; they form the structure of things like muscle, hair and connective tissue. They also make up hormones that regulate our system, enzymes that trigger chemical reactions, antibodies to protect our bodies and the hemoglobin that carries oxygen throughout our blood stream.

Amino acids, of which there are 20, are the building blocks of protein. Various combinations and formations of these amino acids make up different proteins, and each one serves a different function. The body can produce about half of these amino acids on its own. The rest, however, must come from food. These are called "essential amino acids" and foods that contain all nine at the appropriate levels are called "complete proteins."

Nuts, seeds, beans, peas, and whole grains can be terrific sources of protein. One thing to keep in mind with these plant sources of protein is that not all plant proteins are equal. With the exception of soy, plant foods do not contain all 9 essential amino acids. To consume adequate amounts of essential amino acids, plant foods are used to complement each other with their amino acid profiles. For example, beans tend to be low in one amino acid that grains have plenty of, so combining these foods forms a complete protein, like beans and rice.

Get Smart with Your Proteins

Aim to get about 1 gram of protein for every 3 pounds of body weight daily depending on your needs and activity level. Follow these tips to be sure you’re getting enough:

- Here are a few combinations to try but get creative and find your favorite.
  - Barley and lentils
  - Oatmeal and soy milk
  - Brown rice and beans
- Boost protein in any vegetarian dish with a handful of legumes (including beans), nuts, seeds or whole grains. Sprinkle toasted nuts over a stir-fry. Stir lentils into a salad and beans into pasta. Toss roasted vegetables with cooked whole grains. Have a variety on hand and get creative.


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