

MUSCLE FOOD

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FOR USA TODAY

FACT OR FICTION?

FACT OR FICTION: People need to eat protein every day.

FACT: The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) recommends that everyone consume protein daily. In its new guidelines (choosemyplate.gov), the federal government is pushing for you to eat more plant-based proteins. Recent research published in *Journal of the American Dietetic Association* found that eating protein at every meal stimulates protein synthesis (which is when your body puts together proteins from amino acids to build muscle) and keeps your body fueled up throughout the day.

When it comes to protein, misconceptions abound. That's why we found out the real deal about what's true, what's not, and what you really need to eat.

ABOUT **20%** OF YOUR DAILY CALORIES SHOULD COME FROM PROTEIN.

FACT OR FICTION: Eating a variety of protein sources is important to building muscle.

FACT: Nutritional consultant Mike Roussell recommends getting protein from multiple sources, since eating different foods provides a range of nutrients.

For example, salmon has omega-3 fatty acids, while soy has antioxidants called isoflavones. "By eating a variety, you're increasing the overall healthiness [of] your diet," says Roussell. Plus, if you limit yourself to certain proteins, such as whey or milk, you can develop an allergy by bombarding your body with high amounts.



FACT OR FICTION: Chicken and fish are the best sources of protein.

FICTION: Though many guys tend to load up on both those great sources, don't rule out beef. "Many people still assume all cuts of beef are high in cholesterol and fat, but beef does have health benefits," says David Grotto. In addition to having the nine essential amino acids, it's packed with iron. Just stick to lean cuts of tenderloin, round, and sirloin.

FACT OR FICTION: Bacon is packed with protein.

FICTION: The breakfast favorite is so loaded with calories that it's actually considered a fat, rather than a protein, by most food databases and dieticians. Typical protein sources have about 7 grams of protein per ounce, but bacon clocks in with only 3 grams per ounce. "A slice or two is OK once in a while, but the saturated fat outweighs the benefits of protein," says Grotto.

FACT OR FICTION: Eating protein before a workout is crucial.

FACT: Athletes looking to build muscle should snack on 10 to 15 grams of protein half an hour to an hour before hitting the gym. Doing so can increase protein synthesis and blood flow to the muscles during exercise, making a workout more productive.

TIP: Don't forget a snack afterward. "Following exercise, eating protein helps stop muscle breakdown and aids synthesis so you can rebuild muscles," says Roussell. A new study from the University of Texas at Austin discovered that drinking low-fat chocolate milk after a workout boosts recovery. The study also found that those who drank low-fat chocolate milk gained more muscle and lost more fat during training.

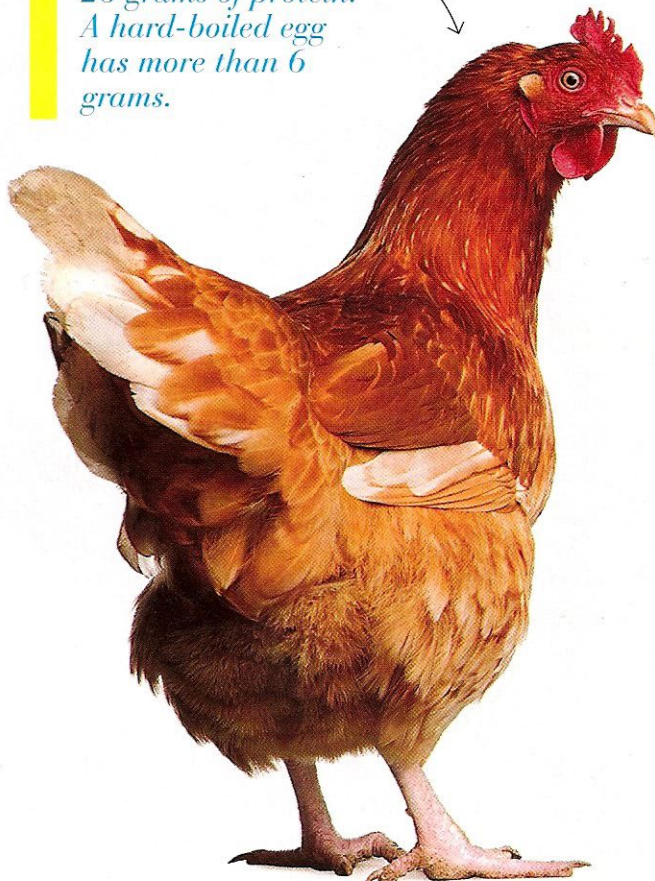
FACT OR FICTION: Protein has many health benefits besides boosting muscles.

FACT: Eating protein naturally lowers blood pressure, according to a new study published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*. Eating protein can also improve the level of triglycerides, which lowers the risk of heart disease, the study found. Additionally, protein and its amino acids are essential for every reaction in the body and to keeping our bodies functioning, including digesting food, stabilizing blood sugar, and recovering from an injury. Low protein levels have been linked with a lower life expectancy and can cause a type of malnutrition.

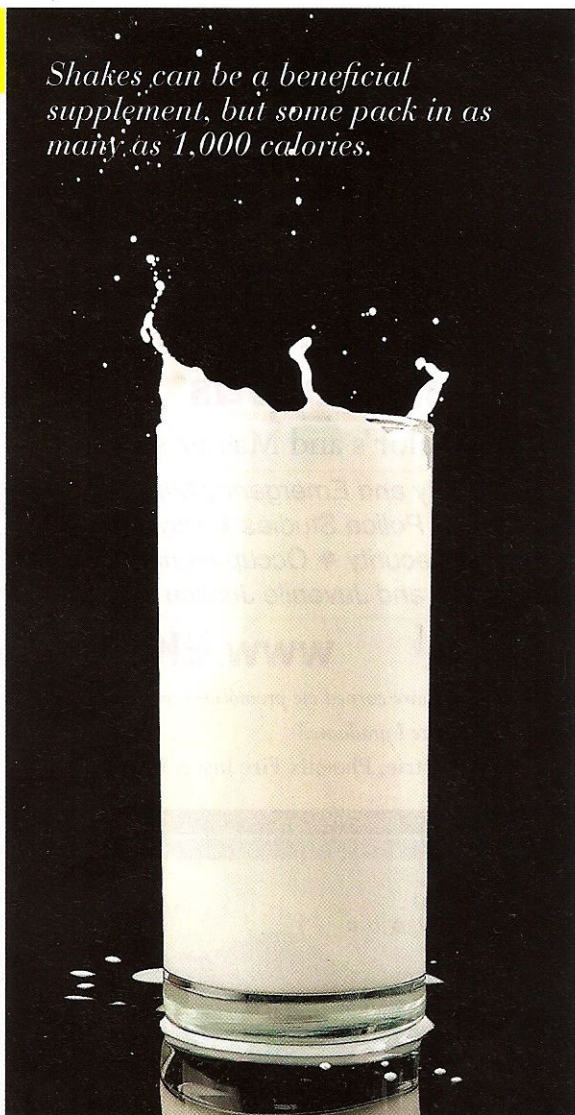
FACT OR FICTION: Consuming protein early in the day is better, since our bodies don't process it well at night.

FICTION: The enzymes that are needed to break down protein are always available, so there's not much research to suggest there's a preferable time, says Grotto.

Eat up! A cooked chicken breast has 26 grams of protein. A hard-boiled egg has more than 6 grams.



Shakes can be a beneficial supplement, but some pack in as many as 1,000 calories.



FACT OR FICTION: Including protein at breakfast is a great way to start the day.

FACT: Men tend to eat a breakfast rich in carbs instead of protein, but studies have proven that if you eat 12 to 15 grams of protein in the morning, you will eat fewer calories throughout the day and have more consistent energy.

TIP: One way to get that boost is to chow down on eggs. “People eat just the egg whites because they think that’s where all the protein is, but there is also protein in the egg yolk, so you should have the whole egg,” Grotto says. “Research has not shown a correlation between egg cholesterol and human cholesterol, so that won’t drive up your cholesterol.” In addition to being packed with protein, eggs are also high in vitamin D, which is good for bone health and muscle structure; choline, which is good for the brain and memory; and lutein, which is good for vision. “People should think about their protein not as an isolated source but as part of a good, healthy diet,” Grotto says.

FACT OR FICTION: It’s better to get protein from food than shakes.

FACT: For most men most of the time, food is the better source of protein. Some shakes pack in as many as 1,000 calories. That said, healthy versions can still deliver. Your body doesn’t know whether the source of protein is food or a shake and “breaks it down into amino acids either way, so you can have your protein conveniently in an on-the-go snack,” says Grotto. For a 250-calorie smoothie, combine a scoop of whey protein with milk, strawberries, and ice in the blender.

FACT OR FICTION: Protein gives you energy.

FICTION: Actually, carbs give us energy. “But it’s not as simple as one food,” says Grotto. “Known collectively as macronutrients, carbs, fat, and protein all work together. Protein plays a role by keeping carbs—particularly glucose—stable in your system.” Carbs help with protein storage in the muscle. Eat protein with carbs for the maximum benefit. Grotto’s ideal ratio for a diet is 40 to 45 percent carbs, 20 percent protein, and 30 percent fat, which is similar to the recommendations in a Mediterranean diet.

WHAT IS PROTEIN?

Protein describes a group of foods. From a biochemistry standpoint, protein is a combination of amino acids. The human body needs nine amino acids. Certain foods, including soy, meat, and fish, contain all nine amino acids. Other foods, such as grains and beans, can be combined to get all nine. The body metabolizes protein by using enzymes to slice the proteins into smaller pieces called peptides; peptides are broken down and digested by the body.