Dear Alice,

What are the best non-meat sources of protein?

? Veggie

Answer

Dear Veggie,

As vegetarianism, veganism, and even just eating less meat become more popular dietary and lifestyle choices for a growing number of people, adequate protein sources are always a topic of discussion. There have been scores of arguments about protein in all its facets: how much you need, what kinds are most useful to the body, and how to prepare it. But what it comes down to is: every body is different, has different needs, and digests foods uniquely, so the best non-meat sources of protein for one person might be the worst for someone else.

The recommended daily protein intake for healthy adults is about 0.4 grams per pound of body weight. Vegans (those who avoid all animal products, including dairy and eggs) may require a bit more at 0.5 grams per pound of body weight. Protein facilitates growth, metabolism, immune system functioning, repair, muscle contraction, and the transmission of nerve impulses and hormones in the body. It can also be a source of energy when the body runs out of carbohydrates and fat for fuel. And protein's not that hard to find, even for vegetarians. Almost every food contains protein: nuts, seeds, beans, soy products (tofu, soy milk, tempeh), grains (wheat, oats, rice), eggs, and dairy products all being excellent vegetarian sources (many of which tend to be low in saturated fat, cholesterol, and sodium).

The list below gives the protein content of some of the highest protein or most popular vegetarian foods:

- Tempeh: 1 cup (31 g)
- Lentils: 1 cup (18 g)
- Chickpeas: 1 cup (15 g)
- Tofu (firm): 4 oz (11 g)
- Peanut butter: 2 tbsp (8 g)
- Soymilk: 1 cup (7 g)
- Soy yogurt: 1 cup (6 g)
- Whole wheat bread: 2 slices (7 g)
Protein is a macronutrient made up of smaller parts, called amino acids. There are different amino acids, many of which the body can produce, but nine which the body cannot. These nine must be eaten, and are therefore called essential. Animal proteins contain all nine of these essential amino acids in appropriate proportions, while the proteins found in plants often do not. Plant-based sources of protein have various amounts of amino acids in them. As such, it was previously thought that certain complimentary proteins? or combinations of plant-based proteins were needed in order to get all essential amino acids. However, rather than planning specific food combos at each meal, eating a variety of plant-based proteins over the course of a day will ensure that you get the essential amino acids you need.

You might find it helpful to consult with a registered dietitian if you want a more specific evaluation of your diet and unique nutritional needs. There is also a wealth of information online about vegetarian recipes, philosophies, and nutritional facts about specific foods.

People decide to eat less meat or no meat for myriad reasons that include health, animal rights, environmental sustainability, and religion. You can rest assured that your decision will further any or all of these goals without depriving you of the protein you need. Enjoy!

Alice!

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