Dear Alice,

I have researched health & nutrition online for a while now, and I work out not only with weights and yoga, but martial arts and mountain biking, as well.

Lately while researching online, I've found that a lot of nutritional value charts conflict in numbers. Some charts say that skim milk contains 8 grams of protein, some charts say skim milk contains 13 grams of protein. Which charts are right?? This is incredibly frustrating and confusing. I did find out that there is nutrition software available, but it's so expensive and it comes with lots of extra things that only doctors need really, like making charts for patients and what not.

Also, I found information on one site saying that adults should consume 0.8 grams of protein per however many kilos you weigh (I weigh 82 kilos, so that means 66 grams of proteins per day). Another site said that adult females between 25 - 50 kilos just need 55 grams of proteins per day. Also, it's not just protein intake that conflicts with all of these charts online.

If you can help out at all, it would be greatly appreciated. Thank you in advance.

Answer

Dear Reader,

There is so much nutrition information available from a host of different sources and it?s not hard to see why confusion can arise. You may have access to information published in scientific journals, which are studies that have been critiqued by nutrition experts. At the other end of the spectrum, some sources such as websites and corporate advertisements are created with the intention of boosting sales of the latest diet book or food product. In order to increase the chances of finding valid nutrition information, it's important to identify, use, and refer back to sources you trust. Additionally, when comparing information from multiple sources it is very important to make sure you are comparing exactly the same thing (same serving size, same source, etc).

When gathering information online, it is important to determine who sponsors the site, how often it is updated, the sources for information, and if advertising is involved (or influences content). As an example; Go Ask Alice! is sponsored by Columbia University, content is updated daily (all pages have an update date listed), the sources are described (see below), and the site is advertising free (learn about our no ad policy).
The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) is generally the most reliable source of nutrition and food-related information for the general public in the United States. The dietary guidelines can be found at their MyPlate [3] website where you can also find sample menus and recipes, a food tracker, BMI calculator, as well as several other useful health and food-related tools.

The USDA also has a National Nutrient Database [4], which is a reliable source for nutrient values for foods. Frequently, this site is accessed by nutrition researchers and developers of nutrient analysis programs. The National Nutrient Database site is user friendly enough that even regular people will be able to do a food search during her/his first visit to the site. Even the National Nutrient Database site, however, can be confusing. For example, it will generate conflicting numbers for nutrients in products such as milk, which comes in a number of varieties. For example, cow's milk provides 8 grams of protein per 8 ounces, evaporated skim milk provides 19 grams, and soy milk, 3 grams. The lesson learned here is to check the details of the food you searched for if the results seem different. For example, a search for milk could yield information on both coconut milk and cow's milk.

The MyPlate SuperTracker and the Nutrient Analysis Tool (NAT) are comprehensive online programs that can be used to analyze not just one food, but an entire day of food intake. They show a comparison of the analysis to your daily nutrient needs. The food lists in these programs come from the USDA National Nutrient Database, and nutrient needs are based on the Recommended Dietary Allowance (RDA).

RDAs are amounts of nutrients that, if consumed on a daily basis, would meet the needs of approximately 97 percent of the population, and are amounts that have been established after years of intensive research studies. The RDA of protein for adult males is 56 grams per day, and for women it is 46 grams per day. This general recommendation is based on 0.8 grams of protein per kilogram of body weight, for individuals in good general health. Protein needs can vary depending on a person's health status and exercise regimen.

For a personalized assessment of your nutrient needs Columbia students can make an appointment with a Registered Dietitian [5]. Columbia University students can call x4-2284 or log into Open Communicator [6] to schedule an appointment. Non-students may have access to a nutritionist through her/his primary health care provider or search for a dietitian in your area through the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics [7] web site. You might also want to check out the resources listed on the Columbia Health Get Balanced [8] nutrition page.

For additional information regarding finding quality health information online, check out Health information on-line: Whom can you trust? [9] Hopefully these new resources will help to clear up your nutrient value confusion, making it easier for you to make healthier eating choices.

Alice!

Category:
Nutrients [12]

Related questions
