

Health Benefits of Plant Proteins



Plant-based protein options are broad and include an array of foods from whole to highly processed. In general, the less processed the plant-based protein, the more health benefits it confers. Whole and minimally processed plant foods that are high in protein include beans, peas, soybeans (edamame), lentils, tofu, tempeh, nuts, and seeds. However, smaller amounts of protein are found in a variety of other whole foods, such as whole grains and vegetables, and especially green vegetables. For example, broccoli has nearly 3 grams of protein per 100 grams (34 Calories) serving.¹ Most people eating a whole food, plant-predominant dietary pattern consume many of these foods daily, and the protein intake when added up throughout the day can be substantial.

Whole food plant sources of protein also contain other healthful nutrients, such as complex carbohydrates, fiber, healthy fats, vitamins, minerals, and other phytonutrients. For instance, nuts are not only a good source of protein but also provide healthy fats, such as omega-3 fatty acids. Additionally, legumes are high in both protein and fiber, the latter of which may contribute to the association between legume consumption and better weight management and improved cholesterol levels.² In contrast, animal sources of protein, particularly red and processed meats, are higher in unhealthy saturated fats, cholesterol, and calories, and

contain no fiber. Processed meats are also high in sodium and have been classified by the International Agency for Research on Cancer as a human carcinogen.³ Red and processed meat consumption has also been linked to increased risk of type 2 diabetes.⁴ Additionally, observational data show a positive association between high animal protein intake and cardiovascular mortality, as well as an inverse relationship between high plant protein intake and both all-cause and cardiovascular mortality.⁵ Substitution of plant protein for animal protein, especially processed meat, was also associated with lower mortality.⁵

The foods from which we get our protein clearly and substantially impact our health. Replacing meat with plant-based protein at meals is an easy way to increase vegetable and fiber consumption while limiting intake of red and processed meat. In addition, whole food plant protein options are often less expensive than meat and have a much lower environmental impact.



Eating a variety of whole, plant foods provides all needed protein and essential amino acids (i.e., the protein building blocks that our bodies cannot make and that we therefore must consume). While individual plant foods contain different types and amounts of essential amino acids, those following a whole food, plant-predominant dietary pattern do not need to concern themselves with these details. Anyone consuming sufficient calories from a variety of plant foods, including vegetables, fruits, whole grains, legumes, nuts, and seeds, will also consume enough protein and all essential amino acids.⁶



Myth or Fact

MYTH: You need to eat animal protein to meet your protein needs.

FACT: Plant foods such as beans, lentils, nuts, and whole grains can provide ample protein for all life stages, as well as fiber and other essential vitamins, minerals, and phytonutrients not found in animal products such as meat, poultry, eggs, and dairy.

PLANT PROTEIN: Plant proteins have no cholesterol, minimal amounts of saturated fat, and are often low in sodium.



18 grams
Red Lentils
cooked, 1 cup



17 grams
Edamame
cooked, 1 cup



15 grams
Black Beans
cooked, 1 cup



6 grams
Almonds
~23 nuts



8 grams
Quinoa
cooked, 1 cup



15 grams
Chickpeas
cooked, 1 cup

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