Protein Tip Sheet

The 2020-2025 Dietary Guidelines for Americans (DGA) includes protein as a special nutrient consideration for older adults. Protein is especially important in older adult diets to prevent the loss of lean muscle mass that occurs naturally with age. Adequate protein intake prevents sarcopenia and frailty later in life. Sarcopenia is the age-related loss of muscle; frailty is age-related weakness and decreased ability to live independently. Adequate dietary protein is the main preventative factor for muscle loss and maintaining independence. The DGAs relating to protein align with the intentions of the Older Americans Act.

Older adults 60-70 years of age have a higher intake of protein than those 71 years and older. Within those who are 71 years and older, about 50% of women and 30% of men do not consume enough protein. Based on the DGA, older adults do not consume the recommended amounts of seafood, dairy, fortified soy alternatives, and legumes. As we age it is found that many older adults do not process protein as efficiently and adding more protein to meals daily help increase the body’s usage. Research shows the aging population requires 1.2 g/kg of protein a day. However, 25-30 g of protein/meal is a good rule of thumb.

# Menu Planning Tips

* Choose lean or low-fat meat, poultry, and seafood options like skinless chicken or salmon.
* Set consumption limits for ground red meat.
* Include a wide variety of protein sources, such as tofu, dairy, beans, nuts, and tempeh.
* Use legumes in soups and salad.
* Include unsalted nut butters.
* Bake, broil, grill, or roast when cooking, rather than frying.
* Serve seafood at least once a week.

# Protein

Food sources of protein often overlap with different nutrient categories, such as starchy vegetables and dairy. Two examples of this are legumes and milk. States often enforce policies that allow food sources to count toward one nutrient category in a meal. It is recommended that the State Unit on Aging specify what foods count toward protein intake and other nutrient categories.

*Example:* Maryland Department of Aging: *Legumes (beans and peas) may be considered part of the protein group OR the vegetable group, but not both groups simultaneously.*

# Meat/Proteins

Meat sources of protein foods include beef, chicken, eggs, and turkey. In addition to protein, animal sources of protein often contain vitamin B-12, iron, and vitamin D.

Including a wider variety of protein sources helps increase food sources of calcium, vitamin D, and dietary fiber

# Meat Alternative Portion Size Equivalents

Non-animal sources of protein are often referred to as “meat alternatives.” Generally, serving non-animal protein alternatives will help reduce the saturated fat, increase fiber, and decrease sodium in meals. Listed below are meat alternative protein options. Each food listed is equivalent to 1 ounce of a meat-based protein.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Food | Portion size |
| Nuts and seeds | ½ oz of nuts  ½ oz of seeds  1 tablespoon of almond, cashew, peanut, or sunflower butter, or sesame paste (tahini) |
| Beans, peas, and lentils | ¼ cup cooked beans  ¼ cup of baked beans or refried beans  ¼ cup (about 2 oz) of tofu  1 oz tempeh  ¼ cup soybeans  1 falafel patty (2 ¼”, 4 oz)  6 tablespoons hummus |

*Adapted from* [*MyPlate Protein Foods*](https://www.myplate.gov/eat-healthy/protein-foods)

# Nutrition Education

Nutrition education on the health benefits of eating enough protein and consistent protein intake throughout the day can help participants understand the importance of protein for their health, make healthier menu choices, and plan ahead. Visit the **Nutrition Education** section of the [Program Basics page](https://acl.gov/senior-nutrition/program-basics#:~:text=Older%20Americans%20Act-,Nutrition,-Briefs%20%26%20Guidelines) on National Resource Center on Nutrition and Aging website for more information.

# High-Protein Food Sources

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Meats, Poultry, Eggs | Serving Size | Protein Content |
| Beef | 3 oz | 23 g |
| Chicken | 3 oz | 23 g |
| Egg | 2 large | 12 g |
| Turkey | 3 oz | 20 g |
| Pork | 3 oz | 18 g |

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Seafood | Serving Size | Protein Content |
| Cod | 3 oz | 15 g |
| Salmon | 3 oz | 21 g |
| Halibut | 3 oz | 19 g |
| Tilapia | 3 oz | 22 g |
| Shrimp | 3 oz | 19 g |
| Tuna | 3 oz | 24 g |

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Nuts, Seeds, and Soy Products | Serving Size | Protein Content |
| Almonds | 1 oz | 6 g |
| Beans | ½ cup | 7 g |
| Edamame | 1 cup | 17 g |
| Hummus | 2 tablespoons | 2 g |
| Peanut butter | 2 tablespoons | 7 g |
| Refried beans | ½ cup | 7 g |
| Tempeh | ½ cup | 15 g |
| Tofu | ½ cup | 10 g |

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Dairy | Serving Size | Protein Content |
| Cottage cheese | ½ cup | 13 g |
| Yogurt (low-fat, plain) | 1 cup | 9 g |
| Cow’s milk | 1 cup | 8 g |
| Cheddar cheese | 1 oz | 7 g |

*Adapted from:* [*FoodData Central*](https://fdc.nal.usda.gov/) *(USDA) and* *[USDA Nutrient Content list: Protein](https://www.nal.usda.gov/sites/www.nal.usda.gov/files/protein.pdf)*

# Resources

[Clinical Definition of Sarcopenia](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4269139/)

[Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2020-2025](https://www.dietaryguidelines.gov/sites/default/files/2021-03/Dietary_Guidelines_for_Americans-2020-2025.pdf)

[FoodData Central](https://fdc.nal.usda.gov/) (USDA)

[Frailty Syndrome: Definition and Natural History](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3028599/)

[MyPlate: Protein Foods](https://www.myplate.gov/eat-healthy/protein-foods) (USDA)

[Nutrition Needs for Older Adults](https://acl.gov/sites/default/files/nutrition/Nutrition-Needs_Protein_FINAL-2.18.20_508.pdf) (NRCNA)

[Protein Consumption and the Elderly: What Is the Optimal Level of Intake?](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4924200/)

[Protein Requirements and Recommendations for Older People: A Review](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4555150/)

[USDA National Nutrient Database for Standard Reference: Protein](https://www.nal.usda.gov/sites/www.nal.usda.gov/files/protein.pdf)