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Pass The Protein

Why You Need This Energy Essential.

Think that cereal for breakfast, a salad for lunch and pasta for dinner is a sound diet? This "menu" may seem nutritious at first glance, but don't be fooled. It's more like a recipe for low energy levels and poor blood sugar balance. If you eat like this, you probably feel tired much of the time. The reason is easy to explain: You're not eating enough protein. The solution is pretty easy, too: Add protein to your daily diet to increase your energy level and keep it steady throughout the day.

Why is protein so important? Protein helps build muscle, strengthens immune functions—how your body fights off illness—and provides energy. How much do you need? Less than you think. Just three to four ounces at a meal (the size of a deck of cards) are enough to fuel both your muscles and your mind. When it comes to protein, more isn't better—a 10-ounce steak eaten at one sitting can produce protein overload, actually making you feel tired and contributing to weight gain since your body will store what it doesn't need right away as fat. Ideally you should eat protein in small amounts throughout the day, especially at dinnertime—the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) research has shown that eating it at the end of the day allows your body to build and repair itself.

Protein Pointers

1. Top soups with protein sources like diced chicken or turkey breast or chopped hard-boiled egg whites (keep yolks to a minimum—they're high in cholesterol and fat).
2. Be creative at breakfast with non-traditional choices, like cold shrimp or low-fat cottage cheese on a bagel.
3. Stock up on single-serving cans of tuna, sardines and salmon for brown-bag protein boosts.
4. Get in the swim by grilling fish instead of burgers and dogs.
5. Try to eat a different protein food every day to give your body a wide variety of nutrients.

Smart Sources

Animal proteins: The best sources of protein include lean meat, fish, shellfish, chicken, turkey, wild game, eggs and low-fat dairy products like cheese, yogurt and milk. Buy organic whenever possible.

Plant proteins: Mostly fiber and complex carbohydrates, these contain some protein; beans, brown rice, bulgur wheat and kasha can be added to many dishes to up their protein content.

Nuts and seeds: Though high in fat, they also contain protein and are loaded with magnesium and zinc, two powerful immune-boosting nutrients; grab a handful of raw nuts daily for an energizing snack or sprinkle them on salads or yogurt.