

Smart Eating

For several years, I ate a vegetarian diet; the only problem was that my definition of "vegetarian" was too limited; I had a meatless diet, but in the regimen that I kept, there were very few alternate protein sources, like soy or fish. I ate mainly low-fat complex carbohydrates (brown rice, whole grains, pasta, vegetables and legumes), believing that as long as I avoided fat, I was on the path to nutritional salvation. Despite my running, my weight soared. I was hungry all the time. By 5 o'clock, I felt I had been run over by a truck and more often than not, steered straight to my favorite Tim Horton's for my almost daily fix-coffee and bagel. Those were the days I felt sanctified for not succumbing to a donut; but little did I realize then that my whole-grain bagel fared little better than a Boston Creamie in terms of body mechanics: both were filled with carbohydrates which shot up my insulin level, which in turn increased my appetite and made me feel more tired. The bagel was a temporary fix because on most days, my heaviest eating occurred from 5pm onwards.

Once I increased my consumption of protein, my body started shedding both water and fat. I was not on a high protein diet-but made sure I had 30% protein, 50 percent complex carbohydrates and 20% essential fats. I also learned how to select my protein with intelligence. Not all proteins are alike and animal proteins are laden not only with fat but chemicals and hormones. Instead of relying only on meat (with its accompanying levels of fat) for my protein source, I had soy protein as well in my daily meals.

Fruits and vegetables became mainstays for almost every meal. My standard fare consisted of a small bowl of unprocessed oatmeal and soy protein shake with a cup of blueberries or strawberries for breakfast and another soy protein shake plus a large green salad for lunch. I have been on this regimen for almost 4 years now. No longer a vegetarian, I eat some form of meat 2 or 3 times a week. My evening meal is usually composed of whole-grains, legumes, stir-fry veggies with lean chicken, turkey, salmon or chickpea falafel. My body has returned to a kind of internal balance. I am back to a size 4 (my wedding dress size); I have more energy now than I ever did and I cannot even remember when I was sick (more than 5 years ago).

Why do you need protein?

1. Your lean body mass is the metabolically active part of you. It consumes energy, repairs the daily wear and tear of vital body structures and it replaces fluid and body chemicals. It is dependent on protein.
2. If you go on a low-calorie, high carbohydrate, low protein diet, you can easily lose up to 50% of your muscle tissue. Each pound of active muscle mass that you lose reduces your metabolic rate-which means that you can just have tea and toast twice a day and still gain weight. This is very similar to what is known as "sarcopenic obesity"-a condition sometimes found in women who are thin; but because their lean body mass is low and percentage body fat is high, they are still in the obese range in their BMI index.
3. Your body has its own intelligence system as well. If you go on a low calorie, low protein diet, your body will think it is in starvation mode and it will respond by lowering your metabolic thermostat.
4. What you need to do is consume enough protein to keep your metabolism high. Protein is known to be fat-burning. Your body uses very few calories to burn carbohydrates, especially those that are high in glycemic index. These foods dissolve easily in your stomach, release insulin into your bloodstream which increases the body's tendency to store fat. Protein, on the other hand, is tougher to metabolize. Your body actually uses more calories to digest a hard boiled egg than a piece of toast. In the process of digestion, your body also burns fat, converts fat to lean muscle tissue. And the more body mass you have, the faster your metabolism will become and the more calories it will burn for day to day activities.
5. If you eat an adequate amount of protein, your body will not crave carbs or sugar. Why? Because it is well fed. Most cravings are the result of a body that is hungry for nutrients.

The upshot of all this is that we need all the macronutrients-protein, carbohydrates and fats. But we also need to eat with intelligence. Not all proteins are alike and we must be savvy enough to choose vegetable protein more often than animal protein, good low-glycemic carbs more often than high-glycemic carbs, and we must eat enough omega fatty 3 fats to balance out the omega 6. If we carry out all the above suggestions, as well as keep a good exercise regimen and maintain viable ways of stress management, we are well on our way to beat both weight and aging issues.

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About the Author

A runner for 27 years, retired schoolteacher and writer, Mary is helping people reclaim their bodies through nutrition, exercise, positive vision and creative engagement. You can visit her at <http://www.GreatBodyat50.com> or learn how she lost her weight at <http://www.greatbodyproteinpower.com>