

MyPlate: Protein Foods Group

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MyPlate, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) food guide system, helps individuals use the 2010 Dietary Guidelines for Americans to make smart choices from every food group. MyPlate includes an interactive, online guide that provides individuals with recommended food amounts to eat, based on gender, age, and physical activity level. Personalized guides can be found at www.Choosemyplate.gov under the “SuperTracker and Other Tools” tab.

This publication describes ways to incorporate proper amounts of healthy low-fat protein into the diet.

What Foods Are in the Protein Foods Group?



All foods made from meat, poultry, seafood, beans and peas, eggs, processed soy products, nuts, and seeds are considered part of the **Protein Foods Group** (<http://www.choosemyplate.gov/food-groups/protein-foods.html>). Select a variety of protein foods to improve nutrient intake and health benefits. Vegetarian options include beans and peas, processed soy products, and nuts and seeds.

How Much Food from the Protein Foods Group is Needed Daily?

The amount of food from the Protein Foods Group you need to eat depends on age, gender, and level of physical activity. Most Americans eat enough food from this group, but need to make leaner and more varied selections of these foods (*Table I*).

Table I. Daily recommended consumption of protein foods.

<i>Daily Recommendation*</i>		
Children	2-3 years old	2 ounce equivalents
	4-8 years old	4 ounce equivalents
Girls	9-13 years old	5 ounce equivalents
	14-18 years old	5 ounce equivalents
Boys	9-13 years old	5 ounce equivalents
	14-18 years old	6½ ounce equivalents
Women	19-30 years old	5½ ounce equivalents
	31-50 years old	5 ounce equivalents
	51+ years old	5 ounce equivalents
Men	19-30 years old	6½ ounce equivalents
	31-50 years old	6 ounce equivalents
	51+ years old	5½ ounce equivalents

*These amounts are appropriate for individuals who get less than 30 minutes per day of moderate physical activity, beyond normal daily activities. Those who are more physically active may be able to consume more while staying within calorie needs.

What Counts as an “Ounce Equivalent” in the Protein Foods Group?

In general, 1 ounce of meat, poultry or fish, ¼ cup cooked beans, 1 egg, 1 tablespoon of peanut butter, or ½ ounce of nuts or seeds can be considered as 1 ounce equivalent from the Protein Foods Group (*Table II*).

Table II. Examples of “ounce equivalent” in protein foods.

	<i>Amount that counts as 1 ounce equivalent in the Protein Foods Group</i>	<i>Common portions and ounce equivalents</i>
Meats	1 ounce cooked lean beef 1 ounce cooked lean pork or ham	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1 small steak (eye of round, filet) = 3½ to 4 ounce equivalents • 1 small lean hamburger = 2 to 3 ounce equivalents
Poultry	1 ounce cooked chicken or turkey, without skin	• 1 small chicken breast half = 3 ounce equivalents
	1 sandwich slice of turkey (4½ by 2½ by ⅛”)	• ½ Cornish game hen = 4 ounce equivalents
Seafood	1 ounce cooked fish or shell fish	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1 can of tuna, drained = 3 to 4 ounce equivalents • 1 salmon steak = 4 to 6 ounce equivalents • 1 small trout = 3 ounce equivalents
Eggs	1 egg	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3 egg whites = 2 ounce equivalents • 3 egg yolks = 1 ounce equivalent
Nuts and seeds	½ ounce of nuts (12 almonds, 24 pistachios, 7 walnut halves) ½ ounce of seeds (pumpkin, sunflower or squash seeds, hulled, roasted) 1 Tablespoon of peanut butter or almond butter	• 1 ounce of nuts or seeds = 2 ounce equivalents
Beans and peas	¼ cup of cooked beans (such as black, kidney, pinto, or white beans) ¼ cup of cooked peas (such as chickpeas, cowpeas, lentils, or split peas) ¼ cup of baked beans, refried beans ¼ cup (about 2 ounces) of tofu 1 oz. tempeh, cooked ¼ cup roasted soybeans, 1 falafel patty (2¼”, 4 oz) 2 Tablespoons hummus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1 cup split pea soup = 2 ounce equivalents • 1 cup lentil soup = 2 ounce equivalents • 1 cup bean soup = 2 ounce equivalents • 1 soy or bean burger patty = 2 ounce equivalents

Why Include Protein?

Meat, poultry, seafood, dry beans, eggs, nuts, and seeds provide several nutrients needed to build and maintain the body. These nutrients include protein, B vitamins, iron, vitamin E, magnesium, and zinc.

- **Proteins** build and maintain body tissues like bones, muscles, skin, and blood.
- **B vitamins** help the body use energy and build tissues. They play an important role in the nervous system and in forming red blood cells.
- **Iron** carries oxygen in the blood.
- **Vitamin E** is an antioxidant that protects cells from breaking down.
- **Magnesium** is important for bone health and in releasing energy from muscles.
- **Zinc** helps our immune system.
- **EPA and DHA are omega-3 fatty acids** found in varying amounts in seafood. Eating 8 ounces of seafood per week may help reduce the risk for heart disease.

Vary Protein Choices

Most Americans get enough foods from the protein foods group but could make leaner and healthier choices.

- **Some food choices in this group are high in saturated fat.** Diets high in saturated fats raise “bad” cholesterol levels (LDL or low-density lipoprotein) in the blood. High LDL cholesterol increases the risk for coronary heart disease. These include fatty cuts of beef, pork, and lamb; regular (75 percent to 85 percent lean) ground beef; regular sausages, hot dogs, and bacon; some luncheon meats (regular bologna and salami); and some poultry such as duck. To help keep blood cholesterol levels healthy, limit the amount of these foods you eat.
- **Some foods from this group are high in cholesterol.** Diets high in cholesterol can raise LDL cholesterol levels in the blood. Cholesterol is only found in foods from animal sources. These include egg yolks (egg whites are cholesterol-free) and organ meats such as liver and giblets. To help keep blood cholesterol levels healthy, limit the amount of these foods you eat.
- **Seafood:** Eating seafood twice a week (6 to 8 ounces total) may reduce the risk of death from coronary artery disease. Eat fish that is rich in omega-3 fatty acids such as herring, salmon, and trout, and prepare fish without adding any fat.
- **Beans and Peas:** Choose cooked dry beans or peas as a main dish or add them to other dishes in your meals. Some ideas for adding cooked dry beans and peas include chili with pinto or kidney beans; split pea, lentil, minestrone or white bean soup; baked beans and black bean burritos.

- **Nuts and Seeds:** Nuts and seeds also are good choices as a snack, on salads, or in main dishes. Sunflower seeds, almonds, and hazelnuts are rich sources of vitamin E, and walnuts and ground flax are excellent sources of omega-3 fatty acids. Because nuts and seeds are high in calories, eat them in small portions. Use them to replace other protein foods, like some meat or poultry, rather than adding them to what you already eat. In addition, choose unsalted nuts and seeds to help reduce sodium intakes.

Making Healthy Choices

The nutrient content varies among the individual foods in the protein foods group. Keep your choices from the protein foods group lean by choosing:

- Lean beef cuts including round steak and roasts, top loin, top sirloin, and chuck shoulder and arm roasts.
- Lean pork cuts including pork loin, tenderloin, center loin, and ham.
- Extra lean ground beef with a label of 90 percent (or higher) lean.
- Skinless chicken or turkey (buy it skinless or remove skin).
- Lean turkey, roast beef, ham, or low-fat luncheon meats.

Keep It Lean While Cooking

When cooking, keep protein choices lean. Try some of the following tips to trim the fat.

- Trim away all the visible fat from meats and poultry before cooking.
- Grill, broil, roast, or boil meat instead of frying it.
- Drain off any fat that appears during cooking.
- Skip or limit breading on meats, poultry, and fish — it only adds fat and calories.
- Prepare dry beans and peas without added fats.
- Choose and prepare foods without high-fat sauces or gravies.

What to Look for on the Food Label

Check the Nutrition Facts Label for the saturated fat, *trans* fat, cholesterol, and sodium content of packaged foods.

- Processed meats such as hams, sausages, frankfurters, and luncheon or deli meats have added sodium.
- Fresh chicken, turkey, and pork that have been enhanced with a salt-containing solution also have added sodium. Check the product label for statements such as “self-basting” or “contains up to __ percent of __.”

- Lower-fat versions of many processed meats are available. Choose products with less fat and saturated fat.

Keep It Safe

- Take care when storing and preparing meats, poultry, seafood, and eggs at home to reduce risk of foodborne illness. Keep the work area clean and make sure to maintain proper temperatures when storing and cooking meats, poultry, seafood, and eggs.
- Wash cutting boards, knives, utensils, and counter tops with hot soapy water after working with each of these foods.
- Store raw meat, poultry, and seafood on the bottom shelf of the refrigerator so their juices do not drop onto other foods.
- Cook raw meat, poultry, and eggs to a safe internal temperature (above 140°F) and keep them cool (below 40°F) or frozen (under 0°F) when storing. Do not leave these foods at room temperature for more than two hours.
- Avoid eating raw or partially cooked eggs, meat, poultry, or foods containing raw eggs.
- Do not thaw foods at room temperature. Instead, place them in the refrigerator, put them in airtight containers under running cold water or thaw them on a plate in the microwave and use immediately.

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