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Protein Power: Why We Need It as We Age

Protein is an essential nutrient, and as we get older, we need to ensure we get the right amount. As we age, we can become more susceptible to muscle loss, thus increasing the risk of falling. Protein is vital for all the cells in our body. Protein is essential for building muscle and bone. Older adults need protein to help preserve muscle mass, support immune function, and promote recovery from illnesses and injury.

The need for the right amount of protein in our diets increases as we get older. Protein is a macronutrient, meaning we need larger amounts. Macronutrients include carbohydrates, lipids (fats), and proteins. Vitamins and minerals are micronutrients; we don't need as much of them. The building blocks of protein are amino acids. Our bodies cannot make all the amino acids we need; these are called "essential", and we need to consume them in our diets.

As we age, we tend to lose muscle mass, called sarcopenia, which begins in our 30s, and the muscle loss accelerates as we age. Without adequate protein in our diets, losing up to 30% of muscle mass by age 80 is possible. This loss contributes to frailty, increased risk of falls, slower recovery time, and reduced independence.

Most adults need 10-30% of their calories from protein. Research shows that older adults may benefit from amounts as high as 25-35 grams of protein per meal. Protein can be found in more than just meat and dairy products. Below is a list of foods containing animal and plant-based protein.

Protein Sources:

- **Meat:** beef, bison, deer, pork, lamb
- **Poultry:** chicken, turkey, duck, pheasant
- **Fish and Shellfish:** salmon, tuna, cod, shrimp, lobster, oysters
- **Dairy:** Cheese, milk, whey, yogurt, cottage cheese
- **Eggs**
- **Soy:** Tofu, soymilk, edamame, sprouts, tempeh
- **Legumes:** peanuts, peanut butter, lentils, chickpeas, navy beans, black beans, kidney beans, green peas, black-eyed peas
- **Nuts:** Cashews, almonds, walnuts, pecans, pistachios, pine nuts, macadamia, Brazil nuts, nut butters
- **Seeds:** Sunflower, pumpkin, chia, hemp, flax, and sesame seeds

Protein is one of the cornerstones of healthy aging. By including the right amount of protein in your diet, you can make positive improvements for a healthy life. Contact your healthcare professionals if you have questions about how much protein you need to eat.

References

South Dakota State University Extension: Macronutrients
University of Missouri: Protein