

ASK WELL

Can Protein Powders Help Aging Muscles?

Older adults typically need more protein than younger people. Here's how to ensure you're getting enough.



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Q: Should older adults use whey protein powder or other supplements to help maintain muscle mass with aging?

Protein is a particularly important macronutrient for older adults. Studies show that, on average, people start to gradually lose muscle mass in their 30s and 40s, and that after the age of 60 this decline accelerates.

When it gets severe enough, this loss of muscle mass with age, known as sarcopenia, can lead to serious health problems. Studies show that sarcopenia can increase the risk of falls, fractures and physical disabilities — all of which can hamper an older adult's mobility, independence and quality of life. Sarcopenia can also lead to insulin resistance, a precursor to Type 2 diabetes.

But consuming an adequate amount of protein can help to slow or minimize this muscle loss with age. Whey protein powder can certainly help you meet your protein needs, experts say, but it's not necessary if you make sure to get enough protein from your daily meals.

Federal guidelines recommend that most healthy adults consume at least 0.8 grams of protein per kilogram of body weight per day. However, this is the minimum amount you need to avoid becoming malnourished — and many experts say that for optimal health you should aim a little higher. As you age, especially if you are 65 or older, you'll need to consume more than the recommended dietary allowance to preserve your muscle, said Katie Dodd, a registered dietitian and founder of the Geriatric Dietitian blog.

"Research has shown that older adults do need a little more protein than younger adults," she said. "A lot of that has to do with sarcopenia. They need it to protect their muscle mass. I talk a lot about protein because you need it in order to get the most out of your golden years."



Most healthy adults get enough protein from their diets to meet their daily needs. But if you aren't getting enough protein from your meals, it's fine to boost your intake with supplements, experts say. Aileen Son for The New York Times

Ms. Dodd recommends that generally healthy adults who are 65 or older consume at least 1 to 1.2 grams of protein per kilogram of body weight. For a person who weighs 150 pounds, this means incorporating about 68 to 82 grams of protein into your daily diet. Ms. Dodd cautioned, however, that protein needs can vary depending on one's circumstances. Older adults who have a wound or injury might need slightly more protein to help with their healing, she said, while people who have kidney disease might be advised to reduce their protein intake. Varying levels of physical activity may also change the calculation. It's a good idea to consult with your health care provider before making any significant changes to your diet.

Whether you get your protein from supplements or from whole foods, it's best to spread your intake across the day, rather than consuming the bulk of your protein in one meal, so your body has time to absorb it. You should focus on getting your protein from whole foods like fish, dairy, meat, eggs and poultry, Ms. Dodd said. You can also get it from plant foods like nuts, beans and lentils. If you can't get all the protein you need from whole foods, then it's fine to boost your intake through protein supplements, Ms. Dodd said. Whey protein is a particularly good source of protein because it's rich in amino acids — the building blocks of protein — and the body absorbs it nicely. It's also been shown in studies to be particularly beneficial for muscle health when paired with exercise. But for people who are vegan, supplementing with soy, pea or hemp protein products can work as well.

"The standard healthy adult who is eating a healthy diet does not need a protein supplement," Ms. Dodd said. "But if they can't get their protein needs through food, then that's when supplements can be helpful."

If you need help determining your daily protein needs, try visiting the protein intake calculator at [Examine.com](https://www.examine.com), a large and independent database of nutrition research. The calculator takes into account your sex, weight and activity level to help you figure out how much protein you need. If your goal is to minimize your risk of sarcopenia, then combining an adequate level of protein intake with regular physical activity will do a lot to protect your muscle mass as you age, said Bill Willis, a scientist who studies muscle protein synthesis at Ohio State University and a researcher at [Examine.com](https://www.examine.com). Resistance exercises like push-ups, squats and lifting weights or using resistance bands are best. But studies show that even low-intensity forms of physical activity like walking, gardening, lawn mowing and grocery shopping can help to offset the loss of muscle with age.

“The take-home message for people 65 and up is that you should make sure you consume enough protein and, number two, be active,” Dr. Willis said. “Being sedentary seems to promote sarcopenia more than anything else.”

Correction: May 25, 2022

An earlier version of this article misstated one aspect of the Examine.com protein intake calculator. It takes into account weight, activity levels and other variables, but not age.

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