

GRAB AND GO LESSON

Protein and Good Nutrition

Nutrition and Meal Management | Nutrition Needs

Purpose: This handout provides the nutritional benefits of protein foods for children.

The protein food group includes foods from animal and plant sources. There are multiple subgroups of proteins, which include: seafood, meats, poultry, eggs, nuts, seeds, soy products, beans, peas, and lentils. Beans, peas, and lentils are considered both a vegetable and a protein. Operators are encouraged to offer nuts, seeds, and their butters in their most nutrient-dense form, without added sugars and salt.

Protein is a building block for bones, muscles, cartilage, skin, and blood. Consuming protein-rich foods provides the body with B vitamins, selenium, choline, phosphorus, zinc, copper, vitamin D, and vitamin E. Because the nutrients in proteins are not all the same, it is important to eat a variety of protein. For example, poultry provides the most niacin, meats provide the most zinc, and seafood provides the most vitamin B12 and vitamin D.

According to MyPlate (<https://www.choosemyplate.gov/eathealthy/protein-foods>) the recommendation for protein foods is determined by your age and sex. Examine the table below to find your appropriate amount of protein for one day.

Daily Recommendation* in Ounce-Equivalents (oz eq)		
Children	2-3 yrs 4-8 yrs	2 oz eq 4 oz eq
Girls	9-13 yrs 14-18 yrs	5 oz eq 5 oz eq
Boys	9-13 yrs 14-18 yrs	5 oz eq 6½ oz eq
Women	19-30 yrs 31-50 yrs 51+ yrs	5½ oz eq 5 oz eq 5 oz eq
Men	19-30 yrs 31-50 yrs 51+ yrs	6½ oz eq 6 oz eq 5½ oz eq

In order to understand a proper serving of protein, it is necessary to determine what an ounce equivalent is. Let's look at some common protein portions and their ounce equivalents.

Ounce-Equivalent (oz eq) of Protein Foods		
	Amount that counts as 1 oz equiv in the Protein Foods Group	Common portions and oz equiv
Meats	1 ounce cooked lean beef 1 ounce cooked lean pork or ham	1 small steak (eye of round, filet) = 3½ to 4 oz eq 1 small lean hamburger = 2 to 3 oz eq
Poultry	1 ounce cooked chicken or turkey, without skin 1 sandwich slice of turkey (4½" x 2½" x ⅛")	1 small chicken breast half = 3 oz eq ½ Cornish game hen = 4 oz eq
Seafood	1 ounce cooked fish or shell fish	1 can of tuna, drained = 3 to 4 oz eq 1 salmon steak = 4 to 6 oz eq 1 small trout = 3 oz eq

GRAB AND GO LESSON

Protein and Good Nutrition

Nutrition and Meal Management |
Nutrition Needs

Eggs	1 egg	3 egg whites = 2 oz eq 3 egg yolks = 1 oz eq
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 oz equiv
Beans, peas, and lentils	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 ounce tempeh, cooked ¼ cup roasted soybeans 1 falafel patty (2 ¼", 4 oz) 2 Tablespoons hummus	1 cup split pea soup = 1 oz equiv 1 cup lentil soup = 2 oz equiv 1 cup bean soup = ¾ oz equiv 1 soy or bean burger patty = 2 oz equiv

A variety of proteins should be encouraged. Seafood, poultry, and meat alternates are lower in saturated fat compared to beef, pork, and lamb. Beans, peas, lentils, and seafood are the main protein groups that are under-consumed by Americans. Cheese, yogurt, and other dairy products are considered meat alternates in the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP). These products provide a source of protein and calcium, which helps maintain strong bones. Aim to meet the daily recommendations of protein intake according to the Dietary Guidelines and add more variety.

Tips for Success

- Incorporate seafood into meals.
- Use meat alternates regularly (cheese, tofu, beans, peas, lentils, yogurt, nuts, seeds, and nut butters).
- Add nuts and seeds to mixed dishes.
- Choose unsalted nuts as a snack, on salads, or in mixed dishes.
- Use lean meats and poultry when cooking.
- Choose low-fat cooking methods, such as baking and broiling, when preparing foods.
- Read the Nutrition Facts label to find the fat, sodium, and protein content of the product.
- Read the Nutrition Facts label when comparing two or more products to make the best choice.

GRAB AND GO LESSON

Protein and Good Nutrition

Nutrition and Meal Management | Nutrition Needs

Reference

- All about the Protein Foods Group.* (2016). www.choosemyplate.gov/eathealthy/protein-foods
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and U.S. Department of Agriculture. (2015). *2015–2020 Dietary Guidelines for Americans* [Internet]. 8th ed. <http://health.gov/dietaryguidelines/2015>
- The Effects of Excess Sodium.* (n.d.). www.heart.org/en/healthy-living/healthy-eating/eat-smart/sodium/effects-of-excess-sodium-infographic
- U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service. (2024). *Final Rule - Child Nutrition Programs: Meal patterns consistent with the 2020-2025 Dietary Guidelines for Americans.* <https://www.fns.usda.gov/cn/fr-042524>

This project has been funded at least in part with Federal funds from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service through an agreement with the Institute of Child Nutrition at the University of Mississippi. The content of this publication does not necessarily reflect the view or policies of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Government.

In accordance with Federal civil rights law and U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) civil rights regulations and policies, this institution is prohibited from discriminating based on race, color, national origin, religion, sex, disability, age, marital status, family/parental status, income derived from a public assistance program, political beliefs, or reprisal or retaliation for prior civil rights activity, in any program or activity.

To file a complaint of discrimination, send a letter to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights, 1400 Independence Avenue, SW, Washington, D.C. 20250-9410, or email program.intake@usda.gov.

This institution is an equal opportunity provider.

The University of Mississippi is an EEO/AA/Title VI/Title IX/Section 504/ADA/ADEA employer.

Except as provided below, the text and information in this document may be used freely for non-profit or educational purposes with no cost to the participant for the training, provided the following citation is included. These materials may not be incorporated into other websites or textbooks and may not be sold.

Suggested Reference Citation:

Institute of Child Nutrition. (2025). *Grab and go lesson: Protein and good nutrition.* University, MS: Author.

The photographs and images in this document may be owned by third parties and used by the University of Mississippi under a licensing agreement. The university cannot, therefore, grant permission to use these images. Please contact helpdesk@theicn.org for more information.