

Mealtime Memo

February
2026



NUTRITION BASICS: Power Up With Protein



Protein is a key part of a healthy diet. It helps children grow strong by building muscles, repairing tissues, supporting the immune system, and giving the body energy. This *Mealtime Memo* defines protein, highlights its importance, and provides common food sources.

What is Protein?

Protein is a nutrient found in every cell of the body. It has many jobs, including helping cells grow and repair. Protein also acts as enzymes and hormones and delivers nutrients and oxygen through the blood to keep the body working properly.



Why is Protein Important?

Children need protein because their bodies are growing fast. Protein helps:

- Build and fix muscles and tissues
- Keep the immune system strong
- Clot the blood when needed
- Provide energy
- Keep stomachs feeling full

Where Do We Find Protein?

The *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* recommend eating a variety of high-quality, nutrient-dense protein foods. Eating a mix of protein sources also gives the body nutrients like fiber, calcium, and iron. Protein comes from both plant and animal foods:

- Plant-based foods: beans, peas, lentils, nuts, seeds, tofu, and whole grains
- Animal-based foods: meat, poultry, seafood, eggs, yogurt, cheese, and milk

Choose less processed foods, instead of hot dogs, sausage, or deli meat.



Did you know? The CACFP allows you to serve meats/meat alternates in place of grains at breakfast, up to three times per week. This is a way to boost protein! An example of a reimbursable breakfast is a cheese omelet, strawberries, and fluid milk.



Protein-Rich Foods

Here are examples of foods that provide protein. Keep in mind that some protein foods may also be higher in sodium or fat. For example, ham steak contains much more sodium than plain chicken.

Food	Serving Size	Grams of Protein
Chicken, beef, fish	3 ounces	21–25
Greek yogurt	1 cup	18–22
Tempeh	3 ounces	16
Yogurt	1 cup	12–14
Cottage cheese	½ cup	12
Tofu, firm	½ cup	8–11
Milk	1 cup	8
Beans, peas, lentils, edamame	½ cup	7–9
Peanut, nut, and soy nut butters	2 tablespoons	7–8
Cheese	1 ounce	5–7
Oats	½ cup	5–7
Eggs	1 large	6
Nuts and seeds	1 ounce	3–6
Quinoa, cooked	½ cup	4

Protein supports healthy growth and development. Serving a variety of nutrient-dense protein foods helps children stay strong, energized, and ready to learn.

References

U.S. Department of Agriculture and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2026, January). *Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2025-2030*. <https://cdn.realfood.gov/DGA.pdf>

This project was funded using U.S. Department of Agriculture grant funds. This institution is an equal opportunity provider. USDA is an equal opportunity provider, employer, and lender.

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

For more information and the nondiscrimination statement in other languages: <https://www.fns.usda.gov/civil-rights/nds>

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. Incorporating these materials into other websites, textbooks, or selling them is not permitted.

Suggested Reference Citation:

Institute of Child Nutrition. (2026). *Mealtime memo: Nutrition basics: Power up with protein*. 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.

© 2026, Institute of Child Nutrition, The University of Mississippi, School of Applied Sciences