Vegetarian wants to bulk up with protein foods

Hi Alice,

I'm a vegetarian and I would like to bulk up on muscle. Can you suggest anything? What vegetarian foods are highest in protein?

Answer

Dear Reader,

The key to getting enough protein in your diet if you're a vegetarian is to eat a combination of plant-based protein. It's good to know that proteins (which are necessary not just for muscle growth and maintenance, but also for bones, tissues, nails, hair, and metabolism) are made up of amino acids. Some are actually produced by the body itself. To get the amino acids that the body doesn't make (of which there are nine), it's necessary to eat foods that contain them. That being the case, eating those foods during the same day, rather than in the same meal, is sufficient to get what you need. Strength and aerobic training are also part of the muscle building equation as well. And along those lines, there are a few considerations to be made in order to sufficiently fuel your body and achieve the gains you're seeking (more on that later).

There are a variety of ways to combine vegetarian foods to reach complete proteins, including:

- Beans and rice
- Peanut butter and bread
- Tofu, stir-fried vegetables, and rice

Soy protein is complete by itself. As a general rule, combining legumes with grains and nuts with grains provide you with the complete array of amino acids, as will eggs and milk products (if you are a vegetarian that consumes milk and egg products, a.k.a., a lacto-ovo vegetarian).

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) has provided some examples on daily amounts of plant-protein sources (based on a 2,000-calorie diet):

- **For vegetarians**: an average of 0.6 ounces (oz.) eggs, 1.4 oz. beans and peas, 1.6 oz. soy-products and 1.9 oz. of nuts and seeds
- **For vegans** (folks who eschew all animal products, including eggs and milk): 1.9 oz. beans and peas, 1.4 oz. soy-products, and 2.2 oz. nuts and seeds.
Some veggie-friendly, protein-rich sources include foods such as tempeh (1 cup = 31 grams), lentils (1 cup, cooked = 18 grams), chickpeas (1 cup, cooked = 15 grams), quinoa (1 cup, cooked = 8 grams), peanut butter (2 tablespoons = 8 grams), and broccoli (1 cup, cooked = 4 grams). For additional information about vegetarian- and vegan-friendly protein sources, check out the Vegetarian Resource Group [4] website.

Also, keep in mind that you need to strength train in order to increase muscle; just eating more protein won’t cut it. If you’re new to strength training, check out Weight training: Do I need to change my workout to see results? [5]. Once you start a strength-training routine, it’s recommended that you eat an extra 500 or so calories each day in order to build muscle mass, even if you don’t need to eat more protein. Also, make sure to take in enough carbohydrates. Too few carbs will mean that your muscles won’t have adequate fuel, which might mean that you may feel more tired or weak from exercise.

If you’re an athlete, you’ll likely need more protein in your diet than less physically active individuals. With that in mind, however, the regular consumption of protein in the U.S. typically exceeds the recommended daily amount for even body-building needs, so most people don’t need to add more protein-rich foods to their daily intake. For example, the average (non-body-building) American vegetarian gets about 14 to 18 percent of daily calories from protein (already higher than the recommended 10 percent). You might consider keeping track of what you eat over the course of a week or two to see if you need to add more protein to your diet and, if so, how much. Timing of protein intake may matter too: some experts recommend that serious athletes eat five to six small meals containing protein, fruits, vegetables, nuts, and whole grains (also drink lots of water) each day. Vegetarian athletes may need to pay special attention to make sure they are getting adequate levels vitamin B₁₂, calcium, vitamin D, zinc, and iron (which can be more difficult when not consuming meat). For more information on diet and bodybuilding, check out Wants to build muscle mass through weight lifting and a healthy diet [6] in the Go Ask Alice! Nutrition & Physical Activity [7] archives.

Alice!
Category:
Nutrition & Physical Activity [8]
Fitness [9]
Optimal Nutrition [10]
Weight Training [11]
Vegetarianism [12]

Related questions

Non-meat proteins [13]
What’s a healthy weightlifting schedule? [14]
Vegan eating [15]
Becoming a vegetarian? Columbia Health resources? [16]
Unscrambling conflicting info about eggs [17]
Losing fat and building muscle mass: Can this be done simultaneously? [18]

Published date:
Jun 12, 1998
Last reviewed on:
May 01, 2015