

No, You Really Don't Need to Eat More Protein

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Food trends come and go, but nutritionism is forever. Or at least, that's how it feels when we're discussing protein, the only one of the three basic macronutrients (along with fat and carbohydrates) that has yet to be vilified. It's no wonder that we now uphold the tyranny of the protein shake with raised fists, concerned as we are that even our overwhelmingly meat-centric diets cannot save us from the ills of too little protein.

But in reality, the vast majority of Americans are not hurting for more protein in their diets. In fact, on average, we're getting almost twice the amount of protein we actually need. Even those who are eating vegetarian and vegan diets are generally getting their fair share of the stuff if they're eating enough food in general. So why are we so obsessed with it? The New York Times in 2017 reported that The Hartman Group, a research firm focused on food culture, found that 60 percent of Americans were trying to get more protein into their diets. Physician Dr. Yoni Freedhoff told [Vice](#) that our preoccupation with the macronutrient might have come from confusion about protein's role in weight loss: Protein is satiating, so those struggling to stay full while trying to lose weight might see positive results from upping their protein intake.

And just like that, folks, it comes back to diet culture. We are a society obsessed with thinness, and protein has become yet another tool in the diet and food industries' repertoire. Of course, nutritionism has no gender. But if a fear of carbs dominates women's nutrition discourse, then a preoccupation with protein may fall under the domain of male nutrition. Though protein can be found in beans, nuts and even whole grains, it is still largely associated with meat, despite the fact that meat production is horribly inefficient: We use 25 calories of energy to produce just 1 calorie of beef.

It's no secret that meat consumption and masculinity are intimately interlinked. Carol J. Adam's 1990 book *The Sexual Politics of Meat* claimed that "meat is a symbol of the patriarchy" and drew connections between ideas of virility, strength and the consumption of meat: Salads are for women, steak is for men. These ideas have blended into which foods are considered desirable sources of protein and which are not. It's no wonder that beef and bacon are celebrated while beans are often overlooked. Meat equals strength, power, virility. Beans are for those who can't afford the meat.

If the obsession with protein is just a facet of diet culture and our preference for meat-derived protein is informed by prehistoric patriarchal ideals, it's probably time to start rethinking meat, protein and our overall idea of what "health" means. Can a high-protein, meat-centric diet really be considered healthy when we're now consciously aware that meat production is a major contributor to climate change? When we know that meat is responsible for more than half of greenhouse gases from the production of food?

Protein-rich diets aren't even always good for us on an individual basis anyway. High-protein diets can cause kidney issues for some people. Those who are getting much of their protein from animal products could be putting themselves at risk of coronary heart disease due to the consumption of high levels of saturated fat and cholesterol. It could even put some at increased risk of cancer. And even if you're getting your excess protein from shakes and bars, you still may not be experiencing the health benefits you think you are: These products are often so packed full of sugar and artificial flavors that they're essentially just glorified milkshakes and candy bars. If you think they taste good, then go for it. But if you're choking them down just because you think you need the extra protein, you can probably just stick to a standard fruit smoothie instead.

That takes me to my final point: Worrying about your protein intake, or your macros in any sense, is a miserable way to live. Those who suffer from specific health conditions may not have any choice but to hyperfocus on their diets, but for the rest of us, this preoccupation is just exhausting and prevents us from enjoying our favorite foods without looking at the nutrition label. That doesn't mean we shouldn't try to be healthy but simply that getting as much protein as possible (or the fewest carbs, or the least amount of fat...) is rarely the path to actual improved health. Sure, more protein can result in weight loss, but here's your friendly reminder that thinness and health are not synonymous.

Eat your beans. Eat your sustainable seafood. Eat your meat, if you wish. And enjoy all of it. But please, don't make me watch you try to down whey-infused chocolate sludge at 7 a.m. on the train when we're both just trying to survive the death throes of late-stage capitalism. Thanks.

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