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What's the Best Source of Post-Workout Protein?



After pressing, curling, sprinting, and crunching, the next logical step for many is shaking (and no, we don't mean with a Shake Weight). Protein shakes, bars, and gels are marketed to be as essential as anything for an effective workout. But are these packaged and powdered foods really necessary for an effective recovery, or do the whole-food alternatives have them beat?

The Power of Protein

Downing protein after a workout is often just part of the routine, and for good reason. Consuming protein has been shown to speed up recovery time and increase strength before the next gym session. The magic results from amino acids (tiny parts of proteins), which act as a building block for muscle. After pumping iron, eating (or drinking) foods high in protein supplies the body with amino acids to start repairing the damaged tissue (mainly muscles). Protein shakes offer one method of getting in some muscle-building nutrients after a workout. But are they really more effective than high-protein foods such as chicken or egg?

Pitting powder against whole food, research indicates that the supplements may have a slight advantage. The quick source of amino acids increased the fractional synthesis rate of muscle (a fancy term for rate of muscle building) more than just a regular meal. In addition to adding size, it proves to be effective at increasing workout performance. One study using whey protein found that supplementation did increase muscle growth (reduced muscle loss) and strength in participants. A similar study showed that individuals during the same culture were higher following a training program than their shake-less counterparts.

Just remember: All powders are not created equal. Some varieties are hydrolyzed (a fancy term meaning partially broken down) which means they can be absorbed faster into the muscle—hence quicker recovery.

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[NOTE: Some sentiments contained within "What We're Reading" articles may not strictly conform with Simple Again's nutritional outlook. We read articles containing opposing information all the time and derive our nutritional philosophies from the latest science, the opinions of experts worldwide and our anecdotal experiences in the field. We keep an open mind and a strong affinity for fact-based evidence to help make the world of nutrition "Simple Again" for you.]

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Pitting powder against whole food, research indicates that the supplements may have a slight advantage. The quick source of amino acids increased the fractional synthesis rate of muscle (a fancy term for rate of muscle building) more than just a regular meal. In addition to adding size, it proves to be effective at increasing workout performance. One study using whey protein found that supplementation did increase hypertrophy (read: muscle size) and strength in participants. A similar study showed that individuals chugging protein could jump higher following a training program than their shake-less counterparts.

Just remember: All powders are not created equal. Certain varieties are hydrolyzed (a fancy term meaning partially broken down), which means they can be absorbed faster into the muscle—hence quicker recovery.

Size also matters. Don't look to shake up an entire jug. It appears that 20 grams of protein

taken within two hours after exercise is the most effective amount to maximally promote muscle growth. A heavier dose likely won't produce any major added benefit and may present potential complications in those with kidney problems.

Feel the Pow(d)er: Your Action Plan

Getting in protein after a workout looks to be a definite way develop an Arnold-worthy physique, but the form and variety may come down to personal preference. Whole-food sources can provide all of the building blocks necessary for a full recovery, but lugging a turkey sandwich to the gym in a lunchbox isn't nearly as fun as it was in grade school! Also, some gym-goers might find it hard to force down food after exercise. The reason: During exercise, blood makes its way from the stomach to the working muscles, making it hard to digest whole foods right away.

Still, protein powder isn't for everyone, and it certainly doesn't replace whole food. While it can provide a convenient post-workout fix, whole foods should comprise the bulk of any diet. The most widely used variety, whey protein, may not be appropriate for lactose-intolerant folks or those living a vegan lifestyle (although vegan-friendly varieties like hemp, soy, and brown rice are now available). The key is finding the most convenient (and enjoyable) method for you—and leaving the hard work for the weight room floor.

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