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How Much Post-Workout Protein Do You Really Need?



Protein is essential for maintaining and building muscle, but you don't need to gulp down a carton of raw eggs like Rocky to get the maximum benefit. Consuming 20 grams of protein after your workout should do the trick, report British researchers.

In the study, 48 men ingested zero, 10, 20, or 40 grams of protein immediately after a strength workout. The 20-gram and 40-gram doses more effectively stimulated muscle protein synthesis—the process that helps promote the muscle repair and growth after exercise—in participants than the lower amounts. However, the 40-gram dose didn't produce any added benefit.

When it comes to choosing your 20-gram protein source, stick with whey, a fast-digesting protein found in milk. The reason: "Whey is a rich source of leucine, which activates protein synthesis," says Alan Aragon, PhD, a professor of exercise science at the University of Northumbria.

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When it comes to choosing your 20-gram protein source, pick whey, a fast-digesting protein found in milk. The reason: "Whey is a rich source of leucine, an amino acid that activates protein synthesis," says Alan Aragon, M.S., Men's Health's nutrition advisor. It contains 10 percent leucine while other animal-based proteins have as little as 5 percent. And while the majority of your diet should consist of whole foods, whey powder is an easy and inexpensive way to make sure you're getting enough protein on a daily basis, Aragon says. (Find the best whey powder for you.)

Other whey options include 1.5 cups of low-fat yogurt or 2.5 cups of skim milk, both of which can be added to smoothies. If you feel like cooking, grill up some chicken or salmon. To get the recommended 20 grams, the serving size should be about the measurements of a deck of cards.

So do you need to gnaw on chicken immediately after your last rep? Not necessarily. "Muscle remains responsive to protein for a least 24 hours after exercising," says study author Oliver Witard, Ph.D, lecturer in health and exercise sciences at the University of Stirling in Scotland. Although the effect is higher immediately after exercise and decreases over time, it doesn't mean the opening for protein intake closes after an hour, he says. In fact, Canadian researchers found that 20 grams of protein every three hours four times a day was better at helping men build lean body mass than eating smaller amounts more often (10 grams of protein eight times a day) or larger amounts less frequently (40 grams of protein twice a day).

But don't drive yourself crazy trying to synchronize your meals to a clock, advises Aragon. For the average active guy, eating protein after a workout won't matter if you don't meet other nutritional needs throughout the day, says Aragon. When it comes to building muscle and losing weight, the most important factors are consistent workouts and well-rounded meals that include protein.

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