

The midlife protein mistakes that cause muscle loss and weight gain

From neglecting balance to eating at the wrong time, one nutrition expert reveals the common errors we're making and what to do instead

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Nutrition expert Jo Travers says that loading up on protein at the expense of other macronutrients isn't going to solve any problems Credit: Rii Schroer

From social media to the supermarket shelves, we seem to be constantly bombarded with messages telling us that we all need to eat more protein, especially through mid-to-later life.

Dietary protein is used for all kinds of functions in the body, from making hormones and enzymes to fuelling the immune system.

However, it's important not to go overboard. Evidence-based nutrition expert and registered dietitian [Jo Travers](#), known as The London Nutritionist, says that simply loading up on protein alone at the expense of other important macronutrients, staying well hydrated and getting sufficient amounts of vitamins and minerals, isn't going to solve any problems.

Focusing entirely on protein can even lead to wider issues such as muscle wastage, feeling listless and hungry all the time.

Based on her experience speaking with clients at her various nutrition clinics, what does Travers feel are some of the common midlife protein mistakes we're all making?

1. Relying too much on protein shakes and bars

The net worth of the UK protein supplements industry has been estimated to be in the region of £440m. Yet Travers rarely recommends [protein bars](#) or shakes.

"They taste like they're made out of sawdust stuck together with some sort of sweet glue," she says. "I feel like protein bars occasionally have a place if people really can't eat food for whatever reason. But generally, I don't recommend them at all."

Why? As well as being highly processed, the main reason she says is that they contain little [fibre](#). Instead, she recommends consuming protein in combination with sources of fibre, for example beans on toast made from [wholemeal bread](#).

"In midlife, there are all sorts of things going on in the body," says Travers. "Blood fats might go up, we have a certain amount of inflammation. We need all of those things [fibre and other nutrients] to bring inflammation down."



While she occasionally suggests protein shakes for people trying to build muscle after exercise, her recommendation is that they make their own shake at home using things such as yogurt, peanut butter and either berries or greens depending on whether you prefer sweet or savoury. Another alternative is to have a bowl of muesli with yogurt and nuts.

“Yogurt is great for calcium and iodine, and it’s an actual food as well,” she says. “So you’re going to feel full and satisfied.”

Recommended

2. Overdoing protein

If you’ve been on social media in the past couple of years, you might be familiar with the “protein-maxxing” trend which often encourages people to consume more than 200g of protein per day. Yet in reality, data from the National Diet and Nutrition Survey reveal that the majority of British people are already getting more than enough for their needs.

While there have been some suggestions that over-50s, and particularly

post-menopausal women who are most vulnerable to sarcopenia, should aim to consume slightly more protein, you don't need to take this to extremes. For example, 1g per kilogram of body weight each day, as opposed to 0.75g per kilogram, is thought to be sufficient.

Travers notes that an excess of protein can lead to other issues such as midlife weight gain. "Unfortunately, we do have lots of places on the internet saying you should eat at least two grams of protein per kilo of body weight," she says. "We don't need that much. While you definitely need protein you also need everything else as well. Protein has slightly more calories than carbohydrates, so you can just end up adding calories to your already overloaded calorie intake."

3. Not consuming protein at the right time

While people tend to up their protein with the aim of building muscle, Travers says that there are other factors involved, such as making sure that you're consuming that protein at the right times, particularly post-exercise.

"There's quite a lot of evidence that shows that in the first couple of hours after exercise, your body is much more efficient at using protein to replenish muscle stores and make new muscle mass," says Travers. If you're fuelling yourself with protein at other times of the day, it's most likely that you're going to end up gaining weight.

Building muscle also isn't solely about protein. Travers actually recommends having a little carbohydrate before exercise to ensure that your body has enough energy to fuel the session. Otherwise, it may have to break down muscle tissue in order to get the energy it needs, meaning that overall, you end up losing rather than gaining muscle.

Post-session, she recommends initially having some quick-releasing carbohydrates in the first hour, for example, a banana, so that your body can replenish glycogen – a form of glucose which is stored in muscle tissue for energy – before having a home-made protein shake afterwards.



Bananas are an excellent source of quick-release carbohydrates Credit: iStockphoto

“The window for replenishing glycogen in muscle is about an hour,” says Travers. “And then follow that up with a meal that’s got some protein in. That’s what I usually suggest.”

4. Being dehydrated

Your body doesn’t only require protein to build muscle, it also requires other nutrients, and one of the most essential is water.

“When you’re making a muscle cell, there’s a whole biochemical pathway which involves all sorts of nutrients and enzymes,” says Travers. “In particular we need water as well. So if people are not properly hydrated, it doesn’t matter how much protein they eat, you still won’t be able to make a muscle cell. You can only go so far by eating a bit more protein.”

According to the British Heart Foundation, you should aim to consume 400-600ml of water [1.5 to 2 glasses], two to three hours before exercising, and one glass of water just beforehand.

5. Eating poor-quality protein sources

While numerous studies have warned of the dangers of consuming too many processed meats – with research consistently linking a high intake of foods such as bacon, sausages, and deli meats to a greater risk of cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes and cancer – many of us still eat too many of them, especially men.

The National Diet and Nutrition Survey found that more than a quarter of men in the 19-64 age range consume more than 90g of processed meat (two rashers of bacon or one and a half sausages) every day.

This can contribute to muscle loss over time. “Processed pork products in particular are very inflammatory,” says Travers. “Once your body is in this inflammatory state, it’s very difficult to build muscle. It’s difficult to do anything really, because the immune system is switched on and it’s firing.”

There are also certain limitations when it comes to relying solely on plant protein sources in your diet, such as chickpeas and various beans. While Travers notes that plant proteins do have the advantage of being high in fibre, she says that these proteins are less easily absorbed into the body compared with animal proteins.

Recommended

6. Not getting enough leucine

Once we pass 50, we can become more vulnerable to a condition known as anabolic resistance where the body struggles to generate new muscle tissue in response to protein intake.

One particular amino acid – the building blocks of all proteins – which has been shown to be particularly important in enabling continued muscle generation in mid-to-late life is leucine.

However, while health stores are now selling a growing array of amino acid supplements, [some studies](#) suggest that leucine supplements alone make little difference in improving body composition and muscle function in older adults. Instead, it may be better to get leucine through dietary

sources such as chicken, turkey, cod, Greek yogurt, cottage cheese and beef.

Rather than taking amino acid supplements, Travers' advice is to focus on eating a balanced diet and other key factors for health such as hydration and sleep. "If you're not ticking these other boxes, a supplement is probably not going to do very much," she says.

7. Neglecting balance

One final mistake which Travers often sees relates to misguided dieting approaches. She says that it's common for people to cut out other macronutrients such as carbohydrate, fat or fibre and simply double down on the protein.

"It's often women in their 40s who have come up through diet culture," she says. "They're worried about eating large meals, and so they'll just eat the protein part."



While protein is important, dietary balance is critical, says Travers Credit: Rii Schroer

This is a mistake because without those other nutrients, it's difficult for the

body to use protein efficiently. Travers cites the mineral magnesium as an example, which is a critical component for hundreds of chemical reactions within the body for making different enzymes. Some of the most common dietary sources of magnesium are plant foods such as leafy greens, nuts, seeds and black beans.

“What we want is to have a bit of carbohydrate and some fat and some other things which the body can use for energy, and that spares the protein for doing protein dependent things,” says Travers. “When you just eat protein, the body will use that as an energy source, which means it can no longer be used for things like building and repairing muscle.”

While protein is certainly important, it's dietary balance which is the most critical for maintaining an optimal body shape through midlife and beyond.