

Get the Right Amount of Protein

Kidney Disease and Protein

With kidney disease, eating the right amount of protein can help protect your kidney function. A dietitian can help you make a meal plan that will keep you feeling your best if you have a health problem.



What is Protein?

Proteins are long strings of amino acids that make up part of each cell in your body. There are many kinds of proteins. Your body uses these proteins as building blocks to make cells. Each cell membrane has protein. So do your muscles. Even your bones are held together by a protein support structure.



Animal-based Foods Have Complete Proteins

Some proteins have ALL of the amino acids your body needs. These are “complete” or “high-quality” proteins. They tend to be animal-based, like eggs, meat, poultry, fish, and dairy.



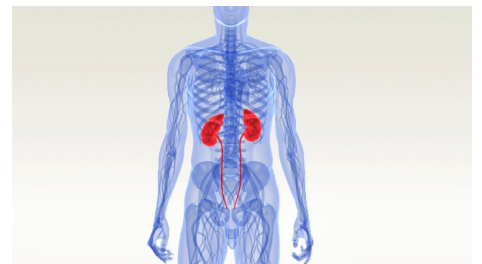
Plant-based Foods Have Incomplete Proteins

Other proteins have only some of the essential amino acids. They are “incomplete proteins,” and tend to be plant-based, like rice, beans, and corn. You can get all the amino acids you need in a plant-based diet — but you will need to eat a variety of foods. Ask your dietitian for help if you prefer a vegetarian diet.



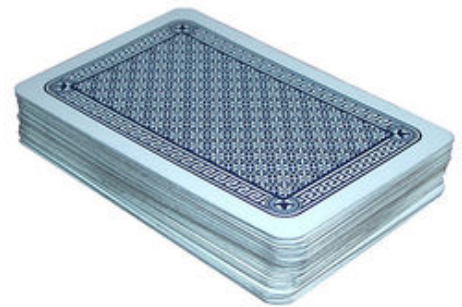
Wastes from Protein Can Stress the Kidneys

When your body breaks down protein, the kidneys get rid of the wastes. If your kidneys don't work as well as they once did, eating too much protein can stress your kidneys. Your care team may suggest that you limit the amount of protein you eat each day to a moderate amount. (Most Americans eat far more protein than they really need.) Your dietitian can help you make this work in your meal plan.



Protein Serving Size

Eating less protein may help slow kidney disease. A piece of meat the size of the palm of your hand, or a deck of cards, is about 4 oz of protein. This is one serving. Your care team may prescribe an amount of protein for you to eat each day. So, if you have chronic kidney disease and are not on dialysis, you might not want to eat big pieces of a protein food. *Small* pieces in a kebab, salad, or stir-fry are a good way to get enough, but not too much.



If your kidneys fail and you do start dialysis, you may need to eat EXTRA protein. Each dialysis treatment can cause you to lose a little bit of protein. You need protein, or your body may start to break down muscle—like your heart. Eating the right amount of protein for your body can help you make sure that your muscles stay strong. Your dietitian will help you.

Protein, Phosphorus, and Fat

Some protein foods like beans, nuts, and dairy can have a lot of phosphorus. When your kidneys don't work well, the phosphorus can build up in your blood and lead to bone problems. Eating lean, high-quality protein can help you get the right amount of protein—without too much fat or phosphorus. Some good choices include fish, chicken, lean red meat, a bit of low-fat dairy, and eggs. To learn more, visit the [How and Why to Limit Phosphorus](#) topic.



What Else CAN You Eat?

When you don't eat as much protein, you need something else to fill you up! Try to focus on vegetables the most. Include fruits and foods made from grains, like rice and pasta, to fill out your meals. You may need to add olive oil or another healthy fat to get enough calories. Your dietitian will help you with this.



Can't Face Protein? Talk to Your Care Team

If you find that you can't stand the smell of protein foods, like meat—or can't eat much at all, see your health care team right away. Nausea and loss of appetite can occur with kidney problems, or can be a symptom of another illness. Keeping track of your symptoms can help you get the care you need to feel your best. Use this [CKD Symptom Diary](#) to help you keep track.

For more information about protein, read this [Protein Handout](#)* from the National Kidney Disease Education Program.

* Links will take you outside of the Department of Veterans Affairs website. VA does not endorse and is not responsible for the content of the linked websites.

