

# Protein Power

The facts on fuelling your family

by **MADELEINE GREY**

Ben Vandertuin is an intense seven-year-old and, when he gets hungry, says his mom, Linda Rhijnsburger, “he gets out of control — unless he’s eaten a little protein.” So along with the “easy carbs” she packs for snacks on the go, the Toronto mom also tucks in “little chunks of ham or some nuts.” The result: a calmer, more satiated and, according to his mother, better-behaved boy.

Could a shot of protein really have that kind of impact?

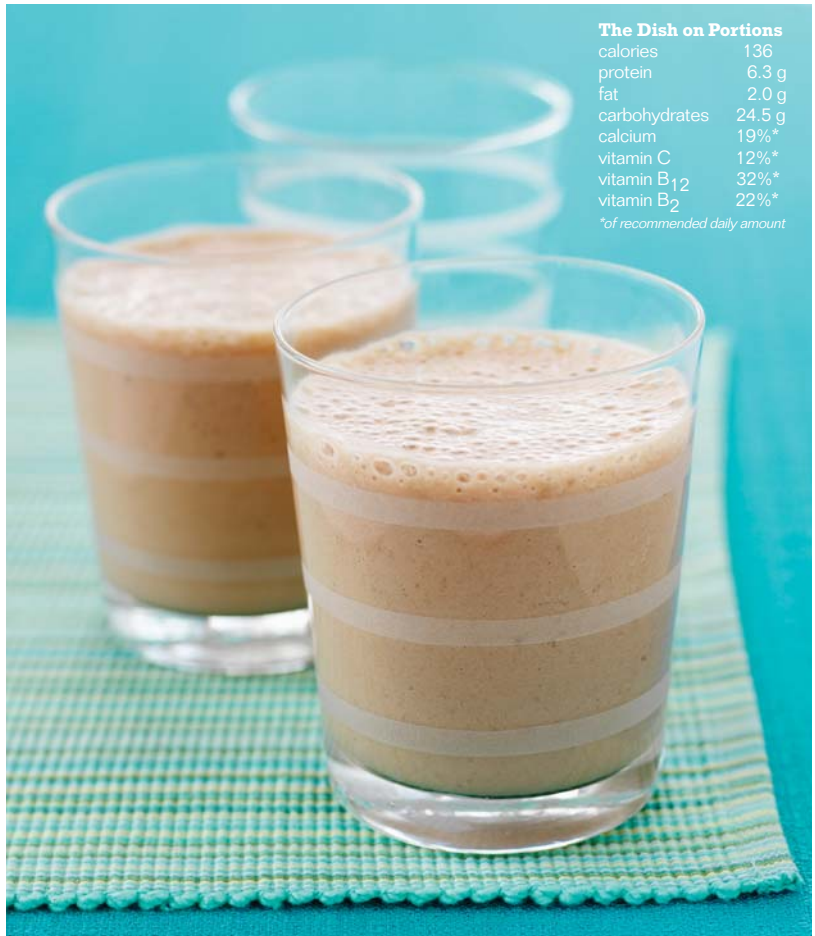
Definitely, says Rena Mendelson, a professor of nutrition at Toronto’s Ryerson University. Protein helps keep energy levels high by sustaining blood sugar for several hours.

That’s not all it does. “It is the substance of life,” says Mendelson. “It is very critical.” Protein is the body’s workhorse. It builds cells, hormones, enzymes, antibodies, skin, hair, bones, teeth, tissue, muscle, ligaments, even scars. Its work is never done. Cells are constantly dying, being dismantled and rebuilt — thanks to protein.

“The body is one big recycling bin of protein,” says Mendelson, co-author of *Food to Grow On*. “Our bodies are quite efficient, but we’re not 100-percent efficient.” We lose some protein via urine, skin, nails and in muscles during exercise. And for kids, growth makes extra protein demands. We all need to eat our daily quota. Here’s roughly how much protein kids require per day:

- ages 1 to 3      13 g
- ages 4 to 8      19 g
- ages 9 to 13    34 g

Turns out most kids are getting enough. SickKids Hospital registered



**The Dish on Portions**

calories	136
protein	6.3 g
fat	2.0 g
carbohydrates	24.5 g
calcium	19%*
vitamin C	12%*
vitamin B <sub>12</sub>	32%*
vitamin B <sub>2</sub>	22%*

\*of recommended daily amount

## Chocolate Banana Protein Shake

Start the morning with this protein-heavy shake. Frozen ripe bananas make it even thicker. Vegan teens can switch the milk products to soy. (Soy protein powders can be found at health and bulk food stores.)

- |                        |  |
|------------------------|--|
| <b>2 cups</b> (500 mL) | <b>1% milk</b>                               |
| <b>2</b>               | <b>frozen, ripe bananas, cut into chunks</b> |
| <b>¼ cup</b> (50 mL)   | <b>skim milk powder</b>                      |
| <b>1 tbsp</b> (15 mL)  | <b>chocolate syrup</b>                       |

In a blender, add milk, banana chunks, powder and syrup. Blend until smooth. *Makes four 1 cup (250 mL) servings.*

*Our recipe tester, Jenny Koniuk, tests Nutrition using both imperial and metric measurements. However, proportions in the metric version may differ slightly from the original, causing small variations in the result.*

dietitian Daina Kalnins estimates in *Better Food for Kids* the typical North American diet provides kids with more than twice the amount of protein required, but there's no evidence this is causing health problems.

Why are kids' diets so protein-heavy? Mendelson says many parents equate protein with growth and dole out lots in a bid to add inches to a kids' height chart. But that's not necessary.

One meal can supply a whole day's worth of the stuff. Take a glass of milk and a peanut butter sandwich on whole wheat bread. The result is 22.2 g protein or all your average six-year-old needs for the day. But even after a protein-heavy meal, you don't want to rob your tyke of more mini protein hits throughout the day.

Dietitians explain the importance of "protein distribution," suggesting that small amounts throughout the day can be more helpful than a single big blast, once a day. Little protein parcels spaced throughout the day help keep kids' appetites on an even keel, avoiding those mind-altering big hungers and blood-sugar lows. It's also easier for the body to absorb the nutrient this way.

But some little eaters don't even chow down on the minimum. Why? Perhaps your child is weight-conscious and not eating all the calories she needs in a day. Or maybe Mr. Picky is on a carb kick, opening wide for bagels, pasta and cereal, but clamping shut at the mere mention of beef or tofu.

## Raising the Bar

**Thinking about making up for missed nutrients with a protein bar? Think again. Rena Mendelson, a professor of nutrition at Toronto's Ryerson University, warns that a protein bar is "almost the same as a chocolate bar with some added protein." Calorie-wise, most do weigh in like a chocolate bar averaging about 250 calories, yet contain about half the fat. Many pack a big protein punch. Does Junior really need more than a day's worth of protein in a single snack?**

**"I'd be concerned that kids might be getting more than they really need," says Burnaby, BC, dietitian Rola Zahr. "Rather than buy something processed (which is more expensive), the best sources of nutrients, including protein, are natural foods such as meats, dairy, nuts and seeds."**

Many babies, toddlers and preschoolers find high-protein foods like meat are too dry and hard to chew. Then there's that budding, adolescent vegetarian in your midst who thinks being a vegetarian simply means avoiding meat.

If you find you're struggling to get enough protein into your child's diet, remember this: Kids don't need huge amounts, but they do best if every meal and snack have a small amount. That can be easier said than done with nut-free policies at school or kids who disdain all things dairy.

What's a parent to do?" Try these:

- Faux peanut butter "pea butter" on whole wheat crackers.
- Single-serving cans of tuna with some whole-grain mini-pitas.
- Little rolled-up slices of lean roast beef, ham or turkey, from the deli.
- The good ol' hard-boiled egg contains 6 g protein. You can even opt for cooked eggs, now sold (in the egg section) in many supermarkets.
- Dairy dislikers might enjoy flavoured, fortified soy drinks or soy smoothies.
- Many kids like chickpeas or white kidney beans, straight from the can.

## VEGETARIAN VIEWPOINT

Got a kid who's going green? Mendelson says kids can enjoy a healthy vegetarian diet with adequate protein, but it does take some diligent planning. Many vegetarian adolescents and teens make an oversimplified protein trade. They give up meat and

## Protein Powerhouses

Tuna, ½ cup (125 mL)	20 g
Meat, 3 oz (90 g)	21–27 g
Protein powder, 1 oz (30 g)	24 g
Quinoa, 1 cup (250 mL)	22 g
Chicken, 3 oz (90 g)	21 g
Lentils, 1 cup (250 mL)	19 g
Veggie burger	17 g
Almonds, ½ cup (125 mL)	12 g
Cheddar cheese, 1 oz (30 g)	10 g
Tofu, 3 oz (90 g)	9 g
Peanut butter, 2 tbsp (25 mL)	9 g
Skim milk powder, ¼ cup (50 mL)	10.7 g
Milk, 1 cup (250 mL)	8 g
Yogurt, ¾ cup (175 mL)	8 g
Red River cereal, 1 cup (250 mL)	7 g
Egg, large	6 g
Whole wheat pita	6 g

embrace dairy, sloshing back milk and chomping on cheese, yogurt and Minigos. If you tally up the grams, dairy hounds are in the clear protein-wise, so why sweat those meals when kids refuse to branch out and eat other sources of protein such as fish, meat or soy products?

Without fish, kids miss out on omega-3s. No beef, and an important iron source is lost. Ignore soy foods, beans and legumes, and the body misses out on those good-for-you phytochemicals called isoflavones.

As always, the name of the game is variety, topping up a child's fuel tank with a little bit of protein all day long to keep crashes at bay and energy levels at a place where everyone stays happy. ♥

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