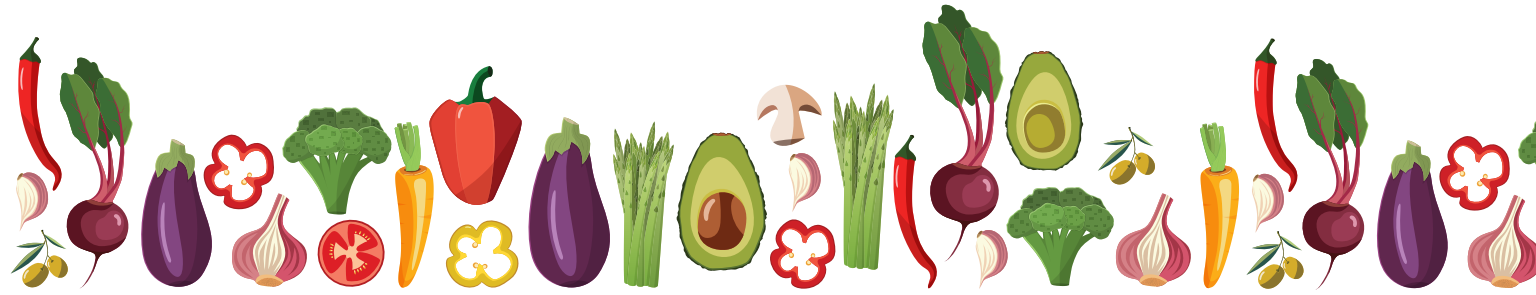
TOP 10 PLANT PROTEINS



These plant-based foods contain the amino acids and other key nutrients essential to a healthy diet.

BY MARY SAVAGE

Protein is essential for maintaining health. After water, it is considered the second most important aspect of nutrition. Contributing to roughly 20% of our body weight, it is found in our muscles, hair, skin, nails, eyes and internal organs—including the heart muscle and the brain.

Protein is necessary for tissue growth and maintenance. The immune system needs protein for the formation of antibodies, which help us fight infections. In the endocrine system, hormones rely on protein to regulate metabolism (thyroid and insulin). The hemoglobin that makes blood red is a protein molecule.

Although the body is an amazing entity, there are limitations: it can't create all the amino acids that make up proteins. In fact, about half of the required amino acids come from the food we eat.

For decades, obvious protein choices were always found in the stockyards, chicken coops and fish markets. From filets to dairy, these products were considered "king".

However, this mindset started to shift some years ago, introducing a gradual movement that's expanded our awareness. Today, you will find a huge variety of plant-based proteins that have a growing appeal, even beyond vegan and vegetarian lifestyles. These choices are becoming part of the mainstream dialogue when seeking healthier food options.

Plant proteins tend to have more fiber and fewer calories, but take longer to digest and are absorbed more slowly. Even so, plant proteins typically do not cause the gas, bloating and digestive distress often associated with certain foods, such as dairy.

Greens also have an abundance of naturally occurring vitamins, minerals, antioxidants and phytonutrients. When you consider plant proteins vs. a sirloin steak, pound for pound the plant proteins pack a greater nutritional profile with fewer calories and more fiber. However, not all of the "essential" amino acids are found in one plant-based protein bowl.

Eating plant proteins often means taking a collective approach by including several sources to ensure you're getting all the essential amino acids. Let's take a closer look at some of the top plant protein choices as recommended by dietitians and nutritionists:

SPIRULINA

This blue-green algae is considered a true "superfood," given its unsurpassed nutrient concentrations. A two-tablespoon serving (30ml) provides 8 grams of complete protein plus 22% of your daily requirement of iron and thiamine, and 42% of daily copper. It also offers magnesium, riboflavin, manganese, potassium and trace amounts of many other nutrients, including essential fatty acids (EFAs).

What makes spirulina such a superstar? It's a compound called phycocyanin, a naturally occurring pigment that is rich in antioxidants; it also has anti-inflammatory and anti-cancer properties.

Studies on spirulina have linked it to health benefits such as promoting a stronger immune system, reducing blood pressure, and improving blood sugar and cholesterol levels. This algae is particularly supportive when fasting, as it provides the necessary nutrients to help the body cleanse and repair itself, while curbing the appetite.

OATS AND OATMEAL

This grain is hardy, warming and filling, and an excellent addition to any diet whether consumed as oatmeal or granola. A half-cup (120ml) of dry oats offers roughly 6 grams of protein and 4 grams of fiber, along with iron, manganese, calcium, zinc, phosphorus and folate.

Oats also contain phytochemicals, including beta-glucans—a naturally occurring fiber that helps to reduce cholesterol. This versatile grain can be used in many recipes, from cookies and bars to veggie burgers and a meatless loaf.

CHIA SEEDS

Although these gems have been around for centuries, they have recently risen in popularity due to awareness of their dense nutritional profile. A serving of just two tablespoons (30 ml) offers 6 grams of protein and 13 grams of fiber. They also provide iron, calcium, zinc, selenium, magnesium and omega-3 fatty acids.

These tiny seeds swell when placed in liquid and form a gelatinous outer shell, much like tapioca, making them an ideal thickener for puddings or an egg replacer. Since they have little to no taste, they can be added to any beverage, smoothie or baked goods. Whether you consume them whole or ground, these ancient seeds will "level up" any dish, snack or beverage.

LENTILS

Originating from the pea family, lentils pack a powerful serving of proteins, carbs, fiber, vitamins and trace minerals. One cup of cooked lentils provides about 18 grams of protein plus potassium, folate, phosphorus, iron, copper, vitamin A and some of the B vitamins.

And there's more good news: in that same serving, you're getting roughly half of the recommended daily intake of fiber. Plus, this type of fiber promotes the good bacteria found in your colon.

Lentils can be added to soups and stews for a creamy texture or they can be sprouted and tossed in salads for extra crunch. However you choose to enjoy lentils, your entire body will thank you.

NUTRITIONAL YEAST

This pantry favorite is versatile, savoury and delicious, with a cheesy flavor. It complements almost any dish where you'd sprinkle a bit of cheese and makes an excellent dairy-free cheese replacement in baking and cooking.

The large yellow flakes are a form of deactivated yeast and provide a complete protein source, offering 14 grams of protein and 7 grams of fiber per each 28-gram serving. It is an excellent source of all the B vitamins and is particularly high in B12. It also provides zinc, copper, magnesium and manganese. Some brands are fortified, so the nutritional information might vary.

HEMPSEED

Also known as hemp hearts, these soft and nutty seeds come from the Cannabis sativa plant; same family as the marijuana plant. However, these seeds have such a minuscule amount of THC, they are considered non-psychoactive.

Hempseed is another complete protein, making this an ideal addition to any diet. Two tablespoons provide 10 grams of easily digestible protein, plus they are a great source of omega-3 and omega-6 fatty acids, and contain a decent amount of iron, zinc and selenium.

Add them to smoothies, sprinkle over yogurt, toss into a salad or enjoy a handful straight from the bag. They have a delightful nutty taste that might surprise you.

GREEN PEAS

There is nothing quite like freshly picked peas: crunchy, juicy and sweet. Whether you enjoy these fresh from the pod or fresh-frozen in a salad, stir fry or stew, these green gems are incredibly nutritious.

One cup offers 9 grams of protein plus 25% of your daily fiber. They are packed with vitamins A, C, K, iron, many B vitamins and trace minerals. Peas help to normalize the body's fluid levels, maintain cell function, control blood sugar and the fiber helps to lower cholesterol. Pass the peas, please!

SPELT & TEFF

These ancient grains have risen in popularity due to their exceptional nutritional offering. Spelt belongs to the wheat family and contains gluten; teff, on the other hand, is gluten free and comes from an annual grass.

Cup for cup, both provide the highest amount of protein (per cup) of all the ancient grains – weighing in at about 11 grams per 240 ml. Likewise, both offer substantial nutrients including complex carbs, fiber, iron, B vitamins and several trace minerals. And they make an excellent alternative grain when you are looking to try something new.

SOYBEANS

You've likely heard of tofu, tempeh and edamame, but did you know they all come from the same plant? Yes, they are all derived from soybeans. Another plant-protein jewel, soybeans are also a complete protein, meaning they provide the body with all the essential amino acids that are required. Regardless of how you consume them, all three contain 10-20 grams of protein for about a half-cup serving.

Soybeans also help to protect cells from oxidative damage and help lower cholesterol, egulate estrogen levels, retain bone mass, boost immunity, reduce hypertension and improve digestion.

AMARANTH & QUINOA

To the naked eye, these ancient grains almost appear to be cousins, as both are small, round and hard. However, they don't grow like other grains and are prized for being gluten free.

As they are equally protein dense, one cooked cup of either grain offers 8-9 grams of a complete protein. They are also a good source of complex carbs, fiber, iron and phosphorus.

Both amaranth and quinoa are available ground and often used as a flour alternative. When cooked whole, these grains make delicious salads or side dishes that are combined with herbs and chopped vegetables – much like couscous. They are also an excellent addition to hot cereal or substitute breakfast option.

Whether you're new to plant-protein alternatives or have switched to a plant-based diet years ago, there is plenty to choose from. This list gives you a jumping off point or perhaps reminds you of a few favourites to rediscover. Either way, these protein powerhouses make a great contribution to any balanced diet.

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