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Healthy Eating Initiative: The Best Sources of Plant-Based Protein

Protein is key to a healthy diet, and it's not just found meat, eggs, or a health store's vanilla protein powder. There are plenty of solid plant-based protein sources that are delicious and full of nutrients. Whole food plant-based sources of protein generally have more fiber which help the body feel full. They may even contain vitamins and minerals that animal protein does not have.

Consuming more whole plant-based sources of protein can aid in managing Type 2 diabetes, maintaining a healthy weight, promoting good gut bacteria, and may lower the risk of cardiovascular disease. Not all plant-based proteins are created equal however, so leaning on whole plant-based sources of protein over processed ones are advised. Meat substitutes are often highly processed and contain high levels of sodium, unhealthy fats, or additives. A full commitment to a plant-based diet is certainly not required to have a healthy diet, but with thoughtful planning, a vegetarian diet can meet the needs of people of all ages. The key is to be aware of your nutritional needs, consult your physician, and make a nutrition plan that promotes a balanced diet for your lifestyle, family history, and age.

Examples of plant-based proteins:

- **Legumes** are beans, peas, lentils, and chickpeas. Adding just ½ cup of beans to your meals can provide roughly eight additional grams of protein.
- **Nuts** are a rich source of proteins and essential amino acids. Nuts also contain a wide variety of nutrients, including omega-3 fatty acids and polyphenols.
- **Grains** such as cooked oatmeal and quinoa. One cup of cooked quinoa provides nearly 8 grams of protein.
- **Seeds** like chia, hemp, flax, and sunflower seeds can be added to virtually anything from oatmeal and smoothies to salads and grain bowls. Sunflower seeds contain nearly 30 grams of protein per cup!
- **Soy products,** such as tempeh, tofu, and edamame, can be prepared in a variety of ways and easily take on your favorite flavors and seasonings. Tofu contains 43.6 grams of protein per cup. Remember to be cautious of consuming too many processed soy products.
- **Vegan protein powder** like pea protein, soy protein, and hemp protein typically contains about 20 grams of protein per serving and can be used in fruit smoothies.
- **Leafy greens** like kale can offer 12 grams of protein in a 2-cup serving. Consider using kale or spinach in your favorite salad recipe instead of iceberg.
- **Potatoes** are surprisingly protein dense. A medium baked potato, consumed with the skin, can provide 3 grams of protein. They are also high in carbohydrates, so eat them mindfully.
- **Nutritional yeast** is a deactivated strain of brewer's yeast. It has a cheese-like flavor which makes it great to add to foods like popcorn and potatoes. Best of all, one quarter of a cup provides 8 grams of complete protein and is a great source of B vitamins, zinc, and fiber.

Additional Resources:

- MBG Health: https://mindbodygreen.com/articles/plant-based-proteins
- Healthline: https://www.healthline.com/health/nutritionists-guide-to-plant-based-protein
- National Library of Medicine: https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/31322670/

