

# Nutrivore90: Prioritizing Protein






## Why Protein Is a Foundational Habit for Lifelong Health

When you think about healthy eating habits, “eat more protein” might not sound as exciting as “eat the rainbow”—but it’s just as essential. Protein isn’t just for athletes or bodybuilders—it’s a foundational nutrient that supports every system in your body, from your muscles and metabolism to your hormones, immune system, and brain.

While the current RDA (recommended dietary allowance) for protein is set at 0.8 grams per kilogram of bodyweight, research shows that most people benefit from higher intakes, especially if your goal is to preserve muscle mass, feel full and energized between meals, or age well. For most people, the optimal range is closer to **1.2 to 1.8 grams of protein per kilogram of bodyweight**, with active individuals benefiting from even more.

That’s not about chasing numbers—it’s about building meals that support your goals and help you feel your best.

**When you get enough protein throughout the day, you may notice:**


-  Better muscle tone and strength
-  Fewer cravings and better satiety between meals
-  Easier weight maintenance or fat loss (if that’s your goal)
-  Improved focus and mood
-  More sustained energy


The good news? You don’t need protein powders or rigid tracking apps to meet your needs. This week’s guide will show you how to build protein-rich meals using whole foods—and how to adjust your plate based on your individual goals.

## Why You Need More Protein As You Age

**Sarcopenia—age-related loss of muscle mass and strength—affects up to 13% of people in their 60s and up to half of those over age 80.** It can show up as fatigue, weakness, reduced coordination, and slower mobility—all of which can impact your independence and quality of life. Menopause appears to accelerate this process: research shows that women lose an average of 10% of their muscle mass during perimenopause.

The two most effective strategies to prevent or slow sarcopenia are physical activity and eating enough protein. Studies show that increasing protein intake by even 20% can significantly reduce the risk of frailty and help preserve lean muscle. In fact, one long-term study found that adults who consumed at least 1.2 grams of protein per kilogram of bodyweight retained up to 40% more muscle over a 3-year period than those consuming the RDA.

 **Bottom line:** the older you are, the more important protein becomes—not just for strength and mobility, but for energy, immune health, and overall resilience.

 **Tip:** *If you're looking for a handy-dandy tool for tracking your servings of protein, you'll be excited to know that the Nutrivore Weekly Serving Matrix includes checkboxes for protein foods in addition to seafood and legumes as especially valuable options!*

## How to Estimate Your Protein Needs

You don't need to count grams obsessively, but having a ballpark idea of your daily protein needs can help you build meals that support your goals.

The optimal range for most people is **1.2 to 1.8 grams of protein per kilogram of bodyweight**, with higher intakes (up to 2.4 g/kg) appropriate for athletes or people in a calorie deficit. Here's how to calculate your range:

### Step 1: Convert your weight to kilograms

- If you know your weight in kilograms, awesome!
- If you know your weight in pounds, divide that number by 2.2 to get your weight in kilograms.
  - *Example:* 150 pounds  $\div$  2.2 = 68 kg

### Step 2: Multiply your weight in kilograms by your protein target range

- Multiply your weight in kilograms by both the lower end and upper end of the optimal protein range to get your target number of grams per day.
  - *Example:* For a 68-kilogram person:
    - Lower end:** 68 kg  $\times$  1.2 g = 82 grams protein/day
    - Upper end:** 68 kg  $\times$  1.8 g = 122 grams protein/day

### Step 3: Make sure you're within the AMDR for protein

Protein should make up **no more than 35% of your total calories**. Since each gram of protein provides 4 calories, you can do a quick check:

- Multiply your daily calorie target by 0.35
- Divide that number by 4 to get your upper limit in grams
  - *Example:* 📌 For a 2,000-calorie diet:
    - $2,000 \times 0.35 = 700$  calories from protein
    - $700 \div 4 = 175$  grams protein/day maximum
- Make sure this number is higher than the upper end calculated in Step 2. If it's not, this number is your new upper end protein target.
  - *Example:* 122 grams is less than 175 grams, so we're good!

This check ensures your protein intake stays within a healthy range and leaves room for other essential nutrients.

#### Step 4: Break your protein target into meals

To make it easier to meet your daily protein goal, divide your range by 3 to estimate how much protein to include at each meal:

- **Lower end example:** 82 grams  $\div$  3 meals = ~27 grams per meal
- **Upper end example:** 122 grams  $\div$  3 meals = ~41 grams per meal


This gives you a ballpark to aim for without needing to track every bite. You can also spread protein across 3 meals and 1–2 snacks (for example: 25g at breakfast, lunch, and dinner, plus a 10–20g protein snack).

Eating protein consistently throughout the day—rather than loading it all into one meal—supports better digestion, energy, satiety, and muscle retention.

## Why Seafood Deserves the Spotlight

Among all protein-rich foods, seafood has one of the strongest research track records for improving long-term health outcomes. Regular seafood consumption is linked with lower risk of cardiovascular disease, cognitive decline, type 2 diabetes, and even certain cancers. Seafood is also rich in omega-3 fats (EPA and DHA), which support brain health, lower inflammation, and protect against heart disease.


Most fish and shellfish are excellent sources of high-quality, complete protein, as well as key micronutrients like iodine, selenium, vitamin D, and B12. If you're aiming to increase protein and boost health outcomes at the same time, seafood is one of the most efficient and effective ways to do both.

 Aim for at least **three servings of seafood per week**, and include both fatty fish (like salmon, sardines, and mackerel) and leaner varieties (like cod, tilapia, or shrimp) to get the full nutrient spectrum.

## Why Legumes Are a Powerhouse Plant Protein

Legumes—including beans, lentils, chickpeas, and soy—consistently show up in research as being protective against heart disease, diabetes, high blood pressure, and certain cancers. They're also associated with longer lifespans and improved gut health.

Legumes are rich in plant-based protein, complex carbohydrates, fiber, and important micronutrients like folate, iron, and potassium. While individual legumes usually aren't complete proteins on their own, combining them with whole grains (like rice or corn) easily provides all the essential amino acids.

 Legumes are a nutrient-dense, budget-friendly protein source worth leaning into. **Aim for at least four servings of legumes per week** (they can count as a protein food, a starchy food, or both!). Try adding them to soups, stews, grain bowls, salads, or wraps.

# Protein Foods

3+ Protein Servings *Per Day*

## SERVING SIZES



palm

The palm is approximately 3-4 OZ (depending on size)

**3.5 OZ**

ORGAN MEAT, RED MEAT OR POULTRY



palm

The palm is approximately 3-4 OZ (depending on size)

**4 OZ**





FISH OR SHELLFISH



bottom 2 fingers  
The bottom 2 fingers of a closed fist is approximately 1/2 Cup

**1/2 CUP**  
(cooked)










LEGUMES

 Meat	 Dairy and Eggs	 Plant Based	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Beef</li> <li>• Bison</li> <li>• Chicken</li> <li>• Duck</li> <li>• Emu and Ostrich</li> <li>• Goat</li> <li>• Goose</li> <li>• Lamb</li> <li>• Organ Meats</li> <li>• Pork</li> <li>• Turkey</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cheese</li> <li>• Cottage cheese</li> <li>• Eggs (chicken, duck, goose, quail, etc...)</li> <li>• Greek Yogurt</li> <li>• Milk</li> <li>• Skyr</li> <li>• Yogurt</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tofu</li> <li>• <b>Tempeh</b></li> <li>• Seitan</li> <li>• <b>Black bean</b></li> <li>• <b>Black-eyed pea</b></li> <li>• <b>Chickpea</b></li> <li>• <b>Common bean</b></li> <li>• <b>Cranberry bean</b></li> <li>• <b>Edamame</b></li> <li>• <b>Fava bean</b></li> <li>• <b>Kidney bean</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Lentil</b></li> <li>• <b>Lima bean</b></li> <li>• <b>Natto</b></li> <li>• <b>Navy bean</b></li> <li>• <b>Mung bean</b></li> <li>• <b>Peas (split)</b></li> <li>• Peanut</li> <li>• <b>Pigeon pea</b></li> <li>• <b>Pinto bean</b></li> <li>• <b>Soybean</b></li> </ul>
 Seafood			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Anchovy</li> <li>• Bass</li> <li>• Catfish</li> <li>• Caviar</li> <li>• Clam</li> <li>• Cod</li> <li>• Crab</li> <li>• Crawfish</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Haddock</li> <li>• Halibut</li> <li>• Herring</li> <li>• Lobster</li> <li>• Mackerel</li> <li>• Mahi Mahi</li> <li>• Mussel</li> <li>• Octopus</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Oyster</li> <li>• Prawn</li> <li>• Pollock</li> <li>• Salmon</li> <li>• Sardine</li> <li>• Sea Bass</li> <li>• Scallop</li> <li>• Smelt</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shrimp/Prawns</li> <li>• Snapper</li> <li>• Swordfish</li> <li>• Squid</li> <li>• Tilapia</li> <li>• Trout</li> <li>• Tuna</li> </ul>

**These foods do double duty:** they count as both protein and starchy food servings.

When you select a whole-food plant protein, like beans or lentils, merge the quarter of your plate filled with protein foods with the quarter of your plate filled with starchy foods. This creates a simple 50/50 balance: half your plate is fruits and veggies, and the other half is your plant protein/starchy foods. Processed plant proteins like tofu, tempeh, seitan, plant-based meats, and protein powders count **only** towards the protein quarter and **not** toward the starch quarter of your plate.

## Tips for Building a Protein-Rich Day

<p> <b>Start your day with protein</b></p>	<p> <b>Include protein in every meal and most snacks</b></p>	<p> <b>Mix up your protein sources</b></p>
<p>Eating protein at breakfast helps set the tone for better energy, fewer cravings, and balanced blood sugar throughout the day. Eggs, Greek yogurt, cottage cheese, tofu scrambles, and protein-rich smoothies are all great options.</p>	<p>Spreading your protein across the day is more effective than loading it all into one meal. Think: 25–40 grams per meal and 10–20 grams per snack.</p>	<p>Different protein-rich foods provide different nutrients. Rotate between seafood, poultry, red meat, eggs, legumes, soy foods, dairy, and whole plant-based combinations to cover your bases.</p>
<p> <b>Pair plant proteins with whole grains</b></p>	<p> <b>Don't forget dairy and fermented protein-rich foods</b></p>	<p> <b>Prep or batch-cook your proteins</b></p>
<p>If you're eating mostly plant-based, aim to combine legumes with grains (like lentils and rice or hummus and whole grain pita) to get all essential amino acids throughout the day.</p>	<p>Foods like plain yogurt, kefir, and cheese offer protein alongside probiotics, calcium, and other micronutrients.</p>	<p>Keep cooked chicken breast, boiled eggs, roasted tofu, canned tuna, or cooked lentils on hand to make building balanced meals easier throughout the week.</p>
<p> <b>Use palm-size portions as a visual cue</b></p>	<p> <b>Add protein to your carbs</b></p>	<p> <b>It's okay to supplement</b></p>
<p>A palm-sized serving of meat, fish or tofu typically provides around 20–30 grams of protein—no measuring or tracking required!</p>	<p>If you're having fruit, crackers, toast, or oats, pair it with a protein boost—like nut butter, hard-boiled eggs, cottage cheese, or edamame.</p>	<p>Protein bars, powders, and fortified snacks can be helpful for boosting protein intake—especially when life gets busy—but ideally, they shouldn't be your main source of protein. These products use refined protein sources that don't contain the full spectrum of nutrients found in whole foods.</p>

## Budget Tips for Eating More Protein

Eating enough protein doesn't have to mean spending more money. With a little strategy, you can meet your protein needs without overspending.

### Skip organic, grass-fed, pasture-raised, and wild-caught.

While these options can offer slightly higher nutrient levels, conventional versions are still high-quality protein sources that are perfectly safe and health-supportive. Don't let marketing convince you that you need premium options to eat well—what matters most is getting enough protein consistently from whole-food sources.

### Use more eggs, legumes, and canned fish.

Eggs, canned tuna, beans, and lentils are affordable, shelf-stable, and high-quality protein sources. Keep them stocked for quick, budget-friendly meals. *Note: While eggs are still a budget-friendly source of high-quality protein, prices have increased in recent years and can vary depending on your location and season. They're not always the lowest-cost option, but they remain one of the more versatile and nutrient-dense proteins available.*

### Buy in bulk and freeze extras.

Purchase larger quantities of meat, fish, or poultry when on sale. Portion and freeze what you don't need immediately to save money and reduce waste.

### Keep a pantry stocked with plant-based staples.


Dry beans, lentils, and whole grains like quinoa offer a protein boost at a low cost. Batch cook and freeze portions to make meal prep easier.

### Use dairy strategically.


Plain Greek yogurt, cottage cheese, and shredded cheese are cost-effective ways to add protein to meals and snacks.

 **Choose value cuts and stretch them.**

Ground meats, chicken thighs, and slow-cooking cuts are often cheaper per pound than steaks or fillets. Stretch them with veggies, grains, and legumes in one-pot meals. Many box stores sell rotisserie chickens at a lower price than whole, raw chickens—if you have a membership, take advantage! In fact, some retailers intentionally price rotisserie chickens below cost to draw in customers, making them an especially budget-friendly protein option when time and money are both tight.

 **Incorporate more legumes.**

Beans and lentils are among the most affordable and nutrient-dense protein foods available. They're also incredibly versatile—perfect for soups, stews, bowls, and spreads. To save even more, buy beans and lentils dry and in bulk and prepare them yourself at home: rinse, cover with lots of water and soak overnight, drain and rinse again, then boil until soft. While this method is the most economical, it does take some planning and time—so it's also helpful to keep a few cans of beans on hand for convenience.

 **Use flavor to make budget options shine.**

Simple proteins like eggs, tofu, or canned fish get a big upgrade from fresh herbs, spices, sauces, and marinades—without adding much to your grocery bill.

With a few of these strategies, you can build a protein-rich diet that supports your health goals *and* your grocery budget!