

5 Protein-Packed Foods for Healthy, Meatless Meals

For most of us, eating a little [less meat](#) could have health benefits. [Research](#) indicates that a balanced diet low in [saturated fats](#) helps reduce your risk of developing heart disease and other chronic conditions.

And while white meats and fish are swaps for red meat, which tends to be high in unhealthy fats, meatless options contain important vitamins, minerals and fiber not found in chicken and fish. Johns Hopkins nutritionist [Lynda McIntrye](#) recommends five foods — high in protein and other nutrients, but with no meat — and explains their health benefits.

1. Eggs



Eggs are a great source of protein. And while in the past eggs had been associated with increased heart disease risk, there's actually substantial evidence that for most people, eggs are not harmful. In general, eating a whole egg every day is beneficial. However, if you have diabetes or heart disease, keep your eggs to two or three a week.

No matter how you whip up your eggs, here are some other ways eating eggs helps your body:

- **Breast health:** Be sure to include the yolks in your egg dishes. They contain essential but hard-to-get nutrients such as choline, which helps lower rates of breast cancer.
- **Eyes:** The antioxidants in eggs may prevent macular degeneration and cataracts.
- **Weight management:** Studies have shown that if you eat eggs for breakfast, you may eat fewer calories during the day.

Meal suggestions: Keep hard-boiled eggs in the refrigerator for a quick snack, try an egg-and-spinach omelet for breakfast or have a spinach salad with a hard-boiled egg for dinner.

2. Tree Nuts



Tree nuts include walnuts, almonds and pecans — don't confuse them with peanuts, which are legumes. Tree nuts are high in protein, fiber and heart-healthy fats. But remember, they are also high in calories so measure your portions carefully. A handful of tree nuts (about one ounce) is a healthy snack and helps with:

- **Cholesterol:** Almonds have fiber, vitamin E and monounsaturated fat, which help lower harmful LDL cholesterol levels. Walnuts have omega-3 fatty acids, which are good for heart health and help lower high LDL levels.
- **Cancer:** The vitamin E in tree nuts helps reduce the risk of breast, colon and prostate cancer. Brazil nuts contain selenium, an important mineral for reducing the risk of cancer.
- **Brain health:** The omega-3 in walnuts also boosts brain health.
- **Skin:** The vitamin E and monounsaturated fats help promote healthier skin.

Meal suggestions: Sprinkle nuts over a salad, stir into an omelet, drop a handful into a frittata or pack a handful in your lunch as a quick snack.

3. Legumes



Legumes include a range of beans and peas such as black beans, chickpeas and lentils. They're loaded with protein, fiber and many key nutrients including calcium, potassium, magnesium and iron. Don't let their small size fool you. They pack a powerful health punch for:

- **Diabetes and cholesterol:** The fiber in legumes does double duty. It helps stabilize blood sugars, which is good for those with diabetes, and helps lower cholesterol.
- **Cancer:** Legumes are full of antioxidants, meaning they help reduce cancer risk.
- **Weight management:** The fiber in legumes also helps you feel fuller faster, which may help prevent overeating.

Meal suggestions: Add to salads, stuffed baked potatoes and vegetarian chili, or puree for a sandwich spread. If you're getting beans in a can, look for a label that says "no sodium added." Otherwise, be sure to rinse canned beans well in water since they're usually packed in a high-sodium liquid.

4. Soy



Whole soy foods, such as edamame, tofu, tempeh, soy milk and soy nuts, are great sources of lean protein. Unlike most vegetarian proteins, soy is a complete protein, providing all the essential amino acids for optimal use by your body. Processed soy ingredients, such as those found in bars and snack foods, leave out many nutritional components. So stick with whole soy to get the best nutritional value and to reap maximum health benefits such as:

- **Heart health and cholesterol:** Soy is plant-based so it's low in saturated fat and cholesterol-free. Some research suggests that soy may help lower cholesterol levels. Folate, vitamins B6 and B12, calcium, magnesium and potassium, all found in soy, help lower your risk of heart disease.
- **Hair, teeth, bones:** With its folate and vitamins B6 and B12, soy nourishes your scalp, hair follicles and growing hair. The calcium in soy helps keep teeth and bones strong.
- **Mood, PMS, migraines:** Folate contributes to serotonin levels, so soy may help boost your mood. Vitamin B6 and calcium may ease premenstrual syndrome (PMS) symptoms, and magnesium may help decrease migraines.
- **Weight management:** The nutrients in soy help you maintain a healthy weight and increase your lean muscle mass.

Meal suggestion: For a healthy, 100-calorie snack, boil 1/2 cup of edamame. When cooled, sprinkle with a touch of sea salt. This is a mindful snack since you have to pinch the pods to remove the bean, allowing time to appreciate your food.

5. Yogurt



Your gastrointestinal tract — and your taste buds — can benefit from yogurt. When planning meals, remember that Greek yogurt is higher in protein, regular yogurt is higher in calcium and kefir (a yogurt-like drink) is higher in probiotics. No matter what your preference of yogurt flavors or styles, you can enjoy these benefits:

- **Digestive health:** Yogurt helps maintain the billions of good bacteria you need for a healthy digestive and immune system. Plus, the bacteria in yogurt help the body break down and absorb critical nutrients.
- **Bone health:** The calcium and protein in yogurt help make bones strong.

Meal suggestion: Mix a handful of almonds into yogurt for a healthy snack.

It's always a good idea to talk to your primary care physician or a nutritionist as you start adding — or subtracting — foods to or from your diet.