

HealthTalk: Protein and a Plant-Based Diet

By Karen Collins, MS, RD, CDN
American Institute for Cancer Research

Q: Can the plant-based diet you so often recommend really provide enough protein?

A: Yes, people sometimes think of protein as only coming from meat and dairy products, but we also get protein from plant foods. Beans, nuts and seeds are the most concentrated sources of plant protein, and they provide fiber, magnesium, potassium and natural protective phytochemicals. Grains and vegetables also supply small amounts of protein that add up when you make them a major part of your meals. As you eat less of the animal sources of protein, keep in mind the need for balance. If you eat very little meat, you can't just eat a rice cake and plain salad and assume you've met nutrient needs. As you shift the balance of plant and animal foods on your plate, look for places you can include beans (in salads, soups, casseroles and more). And it's one of many reasons to switch from snacks of chips or cookies to protein- and nutrient-rich nuts and seeds. A mostly plant-based diet that includes five to six ounces a day of lean poultry, fish or meat and three servings of dairy products or alternatives will meet the protein requirements of most adults. Analysis of eating patterns suggested in the 2010 Dietary Guidelines for Americans shows that if you prefer to omit or further minimize meat or dairy products, you will also get protein well above the Dietary Reference Intake (RDI) if each day you include about three servings of vegetarian sources of protein like beans, nuts and seeds. One serving of beans is ½ cup; seeds and nuts are 1 ounce each.

###

The American Institute for Cancer Research (AICR) is the cancer charity that fosters research on the relationship of nutrition, physical activity and weight management to cancer risk, interprets the scientific literature and educates the public about the results. It has contributed more than \$91 million for innovative research conducted at universities, hospitals and research centers across the country. AICR has published two landmark reports that interpret the accumulated research in the field, and is committed to a process of continuous review. AICR also provides a wide range of educational programs to help millions of Americans learn to make dietary changes for lower cancer risk. Its award-winning New American Plate program is presented in brochures, seminars and on its website, www.aicr.org. AICR is part of the global network of charities that are dedicated to the prevention of cancer. The WCRF global network is led and unified by WCRF International, a membership association which operates as the umbrella organization for the network. The other charities in the WCRF network are World Cancer Research Fund in the UK (www.wcrf-uk.org); Wereld Kanker Onderzoek Fonds in the Netherlands (www.wcrf-nl.org); World Cancer Research Fund Hong Kong (www.wcrf-hk.org); and Fonds Mondial de Recherche contre le Cancer in France (www.fmrc.fr).