

Protein Intake in Older Adults



Malaysia is fast becoming an aging nation. The average life expectancy now stands at 74.7 years in 2016 as compared to 72.2 years in 2001. With the average Malaysian living longer, it is important to ensure that these 'additional years' are spent in good health.

After the age of 30, the average adult is estimated to lose 3% to 5% of muscle per decade due to a combination of factors e.g. aging, sedentary lifestyle, poor nutrition or presence of illness. A decrease in muscle mass and strength over the decades can lead to frailty, reduced mobility, increased risk of falls and fractures. In older adults, it is possible to rebuild those muscle mass through diet and exercise.

Protein Power

Protein from food is broken down during digestion into amino acids which are the building blocks for muscle. Older adults require more protein than younger adults due to reduced ability to break down protein (attributed to aging). The recommended protein intake for average older adults is between 50-60 grams per day.

| Animal Sources of Protein | Average Protein Content (in gram) |
|--|--|
| 1 palm sized of lean meat (~100 gram cooked weight) | 21 |
| 1 palm sized of fish (~100 gram cooked weight) | 14 |
| 1 cup of low fat milk (~250ml) | 8 |
| 1 medium egg (~50g) | 7 |

a) Animal Protein sources are considered the best as they contain all essential amino acids required for muscle building. Do include some protein sources at each meal and/or during snack time to ensure adequate protein intake.

| Plant Sources of Protein | Average Protein Content (in gram) |
|-------------------------------------|--|
| 1 medium tau <u>kwa</u> (~100 gram) | 10 |
| ½ box firm tofu (~120 gram) | 7 |
| 1 cup unsweetened soymilk (~250ml) | 7 |
| 1/2 cup cooked bean (~120 gram) | 8 |
| Almonds (~30g) | 7 |

b) Plant Protein sources (except soybeans) lack some of the amino acids and therefore are considered 'incomplete protein'. For vegetarians/vegans, plant protein needs to be eaten in combination with other foods (e.g. beans and rice or peanut butter on bread) in order to obtain all essential amino acids.

Exercise

Strength training is a good way to improve overall muscle strength. Check with your doctor before you embark on any exercise and approach a well-qualified physiotherapist/trainer to ensure you perform those exercise safely.

Age-related muscle loss is inevitable but it is possible to slow down the process. With adequate protein intake and regular exercise, you can remain strong and healthy in your golden years.

References:

1 Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM)

2 Harvard Health Publishing (Harvard Medical School) 2010-2018: Preserve your muscle mass

3 Recommended Nutrient Intakes for Malaysia 2017: A report of the technical working group on nutritional guidelines

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