

4 protein powders for Hong Kong's health conscious – all approved by dietitians

We pick out the best dietitian-approved protein powders for athletes, dieters, vegetarians – or anyone looking to increase their protein intake through supplements

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Protein powders used to be the stuff for elite athletes or frequent exercisers looking to boost their intake of the muscle-building and -repairing nutrient. But in recent years, protein has become a huge functional food and supplement trend, thanks to its broadening appeal with ageing people hoping to stave off muscle loss, dieters hoping to curb their appetite, or vegetarians and vegans looking for an alternative protein source.

Protein powders are a quick and convenient way to add protein to one's diet. With a growing selection to choose from, it's difficult to know which is best. Dietitians say a crucial factor is the quality of the protein, but you should also consider allergies, taste preferences and budget.

"One serving should not contain more than 25 grams of protein," says Jaclyn Reutens, dietitian at Aptima Nutrition & Sports Consultants in Singapore. "Your body can absorb only so much protein at a time. Too much can strain your kidneys and liver."

Are some Hong Kong men becoming addicted to workout supplements?

Some brands offer information about the products' protein digestibility corrected amino acid score, or PDCAAS, as an indication of the protein quality. Proteins are ranked on a scale of zero to one – the closer the score is to one, the better it is.

Reutens says the PDCAAS has limitations. For example, it does not indicate exactly how much of the nutrients are actually absorbed and used by the body. "What is more important is calculating your protein requirements based on your level of physical exertion, and ensuring that your food intake, including supplements, does not exceed what's needed," she adds.



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So how much protein do you need? “Your protein requirement is calculated based on your weight, activity level and health status,” says Bibi Chia, principal dietitian at Raffles Diabetes & Endocrine Centre in Singapore.

Chia offers general daily guidelines: non-athletes typically need about 0.8 grams of protein per kilogram of body weight. (For a 60kg person, that works out to 48 grams of protein – equivalent to one 120-gram piece of steak, 60 grams of chicken breast and a cup of milk.) Power athletes who engage in strength and speed activities may need between 1.2 grams and 1.7 grams per kg; and endurance athletes may need between 1.2 grams and 1.4 grams per kg.

“The greater the number of hours spent training, and the higher the intensity, the more protein is needed,” Chia adds.

“After a workout, both carbohydrates and protein are essential to replenish our glycogen stores in the muscles

as well as to minimise the effect of muscle breakdown. In general, 10 grams to 20 grams of protein within an hour of exercise is sufficient.”

Ask the Experts: Protein supplements

If you’re sedentary or just exercising recreationally, dietitians generally do not recommend protein supplements.

“As long as you are eating a healthy, balanced diet, you will get the amount of protein you need,” says Chia.
“Protein powders are just convenient for individuals on the go.”



Reutens says: “Protein is high in nitrogen and needs to be broken down by the liver and excreted daily through the

kidneys. A higher protein intake translates to a higher production of urine – and higher fluid requirements.”

Vegan protein just as effective as meat and dairy for sports – if you get the mix right

Combined with an insufficient fluid intake – which Reutens says, is common among avid users of protein powders – excess protein can tax the kidneys and liver. Prolonged strain on these organs increases the risk of kidney stones, kidney and liver damage.

Hits and myths: Can eating too much animal protein damage your kidneys?

“Protein supplements should only be used where absolutely necessary,” Reutens cautions.

Here are the four protein powders most commonly recommended by dietitians like Reutens and Chia. No matter which type you choose, check the product label for sugar and fat that may be added to enhance its palatability – you’ll want these additives kept to a minimum.



1. Whey protein powder

Whey is the translucent liquid portion of milk. The body absorbs whey protein more quickly than casein and soy. Whey is considered a high quality protein due to its high concentration of branched chain amino acids (BCAA), or essential amino acids. There are three main types available in the market: whey protein powder, whey protein concentrate and whey protein isolate (from least processed to most).

Digesting speed: fast

Why it is good: whey protein has been studied for maintaining skeletal muscle mass. In healthy young men, whey protein increases blood levels of essential amino acids and the creation of muscle protein. Studies suggest that whey protein may benefit women and older people, when it's taken after exercise.

Who it is for: lacto-vegetarians, endurance athletes and those who engage in intense weight training.

Avoid it if: you're allergic to milk protein.

2. Egg white protein powder

Derived from egg whites, this protein powder is an excellent source of albumin, a water-soluble protein that is also found in our blood.

Digesting speed: medium

Why it is good: it keeps you feeling full longer than fast-digesting protein. Some people use it as a midday snack to stave off food cravings.

Who it is for: it's ideal for individuals who are allergic to dairy or soy.

Avoid it if: you're allergic to eggs.



3. Soy protein powder

Although plant-based, it is a complete protein with a high concentration of BCAAs. It also has glutamine, an amino acid needed by the body's immune system and used in speeding up recovery, isoflavones, beneficial plant compounds, and arginine, a building block of protein. There are two main types: soy protein concentrate and soy protein isolate, which is more easily digested by the body.

Digesting speed: medium

Why it is good: compared to animal-based protein powders, soy is less likely to cause a stomach upset. Studies show that both glutamine and BCAA help muscle recovery while arginine helps dilate blood vessels, allowing muscles to absorb nutrients faster. Isoflavones are also good for the heart.

Who it is for: vegans and lactose-intolerant people.

Avoid it if: you are allergic to soy. Note that some soy protein powders may also contain whey, casein and traces of nuts, so if you are intolerant to milk proteins or nuts, check the label to be sure.



4. Casein protein powder

A major component of cow's milk, casein is also known as curd. When eaten, its nutrients are released slowly into the bloodstream.

Digesting speed: slow

Why it is good: you feel satiated for an extended duration because casein takes a long time to digest. It helps the body provide a constant supply of protein to the muscles. It is a source of glutamine.