

DEFINITIVE GUIDE TO PROTEIN POWDER FOR RUNNERS

Supplementing your protein intake isn't just for weightlifters. It can be a valuable training tool for runners as well—if you use it correctly.

RUNNER'S
WORLD

By **James Stout for Bicycling** Posted on January 26, 2017



We all know that [protein helps runners](#) recover from hard runs, but sometimes we struggle to get enough nutritionally complete amounts into our system as we rush between workouts and workplaces.

Protein powders can be an easy, convenient option - but they are also historically chalky, gas-inducing and goopy. No one would blame you if you've sworn off the stuff, but if you haven't tried it in a while, it might be time to give protein powder another look. Today there are lots of options, which taste, dissolve and digest much better than they used to - great news for the time-crunched athlete.

So how do you negotiate the frankly bamboozling process of picking one, and how do you use it most effectively? Here's a quick guide to using protein powder to help you meet your goals.

First: How much protein do you actually need?

Recreational athletes need about 0.8 to 1 gram of protein for each kilogram of body weight and day to maintain muscle mass. So, if you weigh 170 pounds, you'll want about 77 grams of protein daily. However, if you're a [masters](#) athlete or you exercise intensely for 10 or more hours a week, you probably need a little more to help repair and build your muscles. The American College of Sports Medicine recommends around 1.2 to 2 grams of protein/kg of body weight for serious athletes.

Most protein powders contain from 20-50 grams of protein per serving, which might seem like the quickest way to hit your mark. However Kristen Arnold RDN, LD, MS, a performance nutritionist and elite cyclist cautions that your body can only absorb 25-30 grams of protein per meal (any excess is converted to waste). So before you choose a protein powder, double-check the serving size and protein ratio to make sure you're not paying for protein your body can't actually use.

What are the best sources?

Once you know how much protein you need, the big question is how to take it in. Lori Nedescu, (MS RDN LD and founder of [The Cadence Kitchen](#)) warns that not all protein sources are created equally. "While all protein is made up of amino acids that are either essential (you have to obtain from an outside food source) or non-essential (your body creates enough), the similarities stop there."

Protein powders typically prioritise one of two milk derivatives: whey or casein. Or they can use a plant-based amino acid source, such as peanuts. Different ratios of amino acids can affect your body differently, so whether you just want a quick recovery drink, or to build some serious sprinting muscle, check the ingredients to make sure they align with your goals.

What's best for immediate recovery?

Whey is an easily digestible and rapidly absorbed protein that makes up about 20 percent of milk's protein content. It is obtained as a by-product of the cheese-making process (curds and whey anyone?), and will send a fast burst of amino acids to your muscles for recovery. Whey protein also contains a high proportion of leucine, the amino acid thought to be the most important in boosting [recovery and performance](#). Aim for two grams or more of whey per 25 gram serving, and if you can, try to pick whey isolate, which has less fat and tends to dissolve better.

How about longer term rebuilding?

Casein makes up the other 80 percent of milk protein. The difference between casein and whey is that casein takes hours to absorb. For this reason, try to pick whey for immediate post-run recovery (as it has a more immediate impact) and save casein for [long term muscle building](#). Nedescu adds that casein can be difficult to digest. She says that "If your powder is causing you gastro-intestinal disruptions, try a goat's milk-based powder - these have roughly 89 percent less casein than cow's, but still deliver excellent nutrition."

When do you use plant proteins?

Plant proteins can provide plenty of amino acids and help with immune function and recovery. Arnold says that "soy protein is the next best thing to milk-based protein. It has been shown to be a 99 percent complete protein source and contributes to muscle growth only slightly less than milk-based protein."

Nedescu is a fan of pea protein, especially for those with soy intolerances. However, plant-based protein powders also tend to have some strong flavours that are often masked with artificial or natural sweeteners. If you're trying to limit your sugar or sweetener intake, check the ingredient and nutrition information.

What to know about additives

Lots of brands will add ingredients to protein powders to further help recovery. Some of these are simply enhanced concentrations of the amino acids already present in the ingredients, such as glutamine or leucine. Other powders add creatine, which actually hasn't been proven to be of much use to endurance athletes. Finally, in most powders you'll also likely find a significant carbohydrate content. A three-to-one to four-to-one ratio of carbohydrate to protein has been shown to optimise recovery, but also adds calories. If you don't want to load up on sugar, stick to straight protein and add your carbs by blending with a banana, some oats, or berries.

Related: [Should you drink that post-run beer?](#)

One of the major factors when deciding on a protein powder is safety. Many products and brands have been shown to contain illegal-for-sport substances (and even pharmaceutical drugs!). Arnold suggests that athletes look for products with the 'NSF Certified for Sport' or 'GMP Good Manufacturing Practices' tag to make sure they are getting a protein that is properly sourced and free of [banned substances](#).

The article [Your Definitive Guide to Protein Powder](#) originally appeared on Bicycling.



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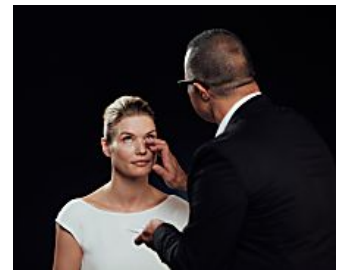
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