**Day 8**

**Title: Precious Protein**

The protein food group includes a lot of different types of food. Meat, eggs, nuts, seeds, fish, beans, peas, tofu and tempeh, seafood, and poultry are all included in this food group. The thing that ties them all together? Protein. On top of providing us energy, this macronutrient is responsible for a lot of really important stuff. Protein acts as a foundation for building just about everything in our bodies: blood, bones, muscle, skin, and other connective tissues all depend on it. It’s a vital part of a balanced diet.

**How much protein should I eat each day?**

[CALLOUT] Based on your age, sex, and general activity level, you need [X] ounces of protein each day. [/CALLOUT]

**What counts as a serving?**

Because there are so many different types of protein, servings are a little more complicated than fruits or vegetables. To make comparisons, protein servings are measured in ounce equivalents. Each of the ounce equivalents has roughly the same amount of protein, even though the size of the food is different. For simplicity’s sake, we refer to them simply as ounces. Each of the following foods counts as one ounce of protein:

* 1 ounce of meat, poultry, or fish (the size and thickness of a woman’s palm is roughly 3-4 ounces)
* ¼ cup cooked beans
* 1 egg
* 1 tablespoon of peanut butter (about the size of your thumb)
* ½ ounce of nuts or seeds

**Don’t forget about seafood!**

Aim to eat 8 ounces of seafood each week. Seafood, especially cold water fish like salmon, mackerel, and cod, contain healthy fats and omega-3 fatty acids, which are good for the heart. Seafood also adds variety and plenty of flavor to your diet.

**What if I don’t eat meat?**

Have no fear! There’s plenty of protein in plant-based foods. Beans, peas, and soybean-based foods like tempeh and tofu are excellent sources of protein. Nuts, nut butters, and seeds also provide protein to your diet.

Just remember that beans and peas are also counted as vegetables. If you rely on beans and peas as your primary source of protein, count your servings toward the protein food group first. If you’ve gotten all your sources of protein for the day, count the remaining servings towards your vegetables.

**Are there any types of protein I shouldn’t eat?**

Fattier types of meat are high in saturated fat and cholesterol. If you eat fatty meat often, you may be raising your risk of future health problems. Fatty meat also has more calories than leaner cuts. If you’re trying to lose weight or even maintain weight, eating fattier types of meat may derail your goal. If you’re trying to gain weight, it may be tempting to eat fatty meat to get extra calories, but it’s still better to eat leaner cuts of meat. The extra fat and cholesterol outweigh the benefit of additional calories in this case.

**Fatty cuts of meat**

Fatty types of meat include ground beef that are less than 92% lean meat. Try for 92% lean/8% fat instead. Other fatty meats include sausages, hot dogs, bologna, salami, and cuts of meat with a lot of visible fat. You can reduce the amount of fat by trimming the visible fat around the edge of the cut. After cooking ground beef, put it in a paper towel lined colander over a plate and allow some of the extra fat to drain out. This also helps to cut down the amount of fat you get without sacrificing the protein and other nutrients.

**Lean cuts of meat**

Examples of lean cuts of meat include fish and poultry without the skin. Beef is also an option. Leaner cuts of beef include tenderloin, sirloin tip, top loin, and ground round. Some of the leanest cuts of pork are the pork loin and the tenderloin.

If you want deli meat, opt for ham, turkey, or roast beef. Or, choose specially marked low-fat varieties.

**A final word**

Protein is really important to your overall health, and you should aim to get enough lean protein every day. That protein doesn’t have to come from meat, though! Many high-protein vegetarian options are out there, and should be a part of your regular diet, even if you aren’t vegetarian. Throw in seafood a couple times a week, and you’ll be on your way to a balanced diet with plenty of healthy protein.

**Sources:**

USDA Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion. (2015, August 19). All about the Protein Foods Group. Retrieved August 26, 2015, from <http://www.choosemyplate.gov/protein-foods>