

7 things patients should know about protein maxxing

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Consumers walking through grocery stores these days are routinely seeing one word over and over again: Protein.

From cereal and chips to ice cream and toaster pastries, brands are putting protein front and center when marketing their products. And they aren't the only ones focused on protein.

A fast-growing social media trend is protein maxxing, where users focus on maximizing dietary protein intake to boost metabolism, manage weight and build muscle. But what are the risks of protein maxxing? Is it actually helpful?

The new AMA podcast “[Health vs. Hype](#)” is produced in partnership with iHeartRadio and tackles those very questions.

The podcast takes on medical misinformation, viral health trends, DIY medicine, and common health myths to help listeners understand what’s real, what’s risky, and what’s backed by science. Host Trace Dominguez fact-checks popular health claims, explains how medical misinformation spreads, and reveals the real-world consequences of getting it wrong.

The [first episode](#) examines protein maxxing and features Thomas Holland, MD, MS, an internist and a physician scientist investigating the impact of lifestyle modifications on chronic diseases of aging at Rush University System for Health.

[Rush University System for Health](#) is part of the [AMA Health System Member Program](#), which provides enterprise solutions to equip leadership, physicians and care teams with resources to help drive the future of medicine.

Know your motivations before trying protein maxxing

Whenever Dr. Holland speaks with a patient interested in a high protein diet, his first question is to understand what their goals are for making that decision.

"If you are increasing the protein intake, what's the motivation?" he said. "Why are you doing this? Is it because you're trying to build muscle and you're [going to] be doing resistance training, then OK. But if it's purely from a weight loss perspective, then there [are] better ways to do it."

Protein does not automatically help you build more muscle mass

"If you want to increase muscle mass, you need to be doing resistance training along with the protein intake," Dr. Holland said. "Protein intake does not necessarily mean faster weight loss. Depending upon the quality of your protein intake, it may mean weight gain, so it's nuanced."

High protein diets are not universally good for everyone

"This comes down to precision medicine and individualized dietary intake," Dr. Holland said. "It's going to be difficult to say that a 6-foot, 230-pound male should intake the same calorie content as a 5-foot-1, 120-pound female."

Macronutrients are important—together

"Focusing on one singular food or food group is not going to be as beneficial as focusing on the whole dietary pattern," Dr. Holland said.

He went on to explain that general consumption of macronutrients—carbohydrates, proteins, and fats—should be about 40-50% carbohydrates, 25-35% protein, and 20-30% fats.

"The reason we're so high on carbs is that's our energy," he said. "We intake carbs and that gets converted to what's called glycogen. And that glycogen gets used in our first 20 to 30 minutes of exercise."

Think about the quality of your protein, not just the quantity

"General individuals [who] are walking around, from a dietary perspective, we're getting an appropriate amount of protein," Dr. Holland said. "Now that's from a quantity perspective. The quality side may not be as good if we're talking about processed foods or high fat meat."

"We generally think of protein in foods as being predominantly meat, so we're talking things across red meat, lean proteins like chicken, turkey and fish," he said. "There's also going to be proteins in vegetables, in particular nuts and beans like legumes. So, if we're consuming lean proteins, then we're getting really solid protein that's going to be nutritious."

Transitioning from a diet is just as important as transitioning to it

"When we're thinking about fad diets, there has to be a thoughtful nature to it, because this isn't going to be sustainable forever," Dr. Holland said. "You have to think about how you cycle off of it. What are you going to do as you move from this diet into your lifestyle, and how are you going to reintroduce those carbs or reintroduce those fats? Being cognizant of

that is very important."

It's possible to have too much protein

"Our bodies can only utilize protein when it needs to be utilized," he said. "We work out, the muscles tear, we have protein, it allows that muscle to build back up. If we're intaking too much, what's eventually going to happen is that protein can be converted into storage forms. We can actually convert it into glucose to use for energy. And at that point it can also be converted into fat. So if you're intaking too much protein, it can lead to some weight gain. It may not be the weight gain that you're desiring."

"Your body loves to be balanced, and it will work so hard to maintain that balance until it can't," Dr. Holland added. "That imbalance, at some point, is because of something we're doing, whether or not we're doing enough physical activity, whether or not we're intaking an appropriate diet. So at some point intaking too much protein will have some downstream effect. Something will eventually happen. Just because something isn't happening right now doesn't mean something won't happen."