

Healthy sources of protein for a plant-based diet

Nutritional Yeast

Years ago, not many people would know what nutritional yeast even was let alone knowing that it makes a great vegan protein source. These days though, we're seeing nutritional yeast used in many recipes and products as a cheesy vegan flavoring without dairy or animal products. Nutritional yeast is inactivated yeast that is grown on molasses then harvested, washed and dried with heat to deactivate it.

Nutritional yeast is a complete protein, meaning that it contains all nine amino acids and it's also full of vitamin B12 which ALL vegans need. Just 2 tablespoons contain a whopping 8-10 grams of protein depending on the brand. Cooking with nutritional yeast flakes or powder is an easy way to enhance the amount of protein in nearly any meal. If you've never used it before, here are some easy ways to incorporate its savory flavor: sprinkle it on popcorn, add it to any pasta dish, stir it in to mashed potatoes or make vegan 'parmesan' by grinding almonds with nutritional yeast in a food processor. Sprinkle on veggies. Really anywhere you want a cheesy taste

Hemp Hearts

Yes, it is true that hemp hearts (also known as hemp seeds) come from the same plant as marijuana, but not the same kind that grows the controversial green stuff. Hemp is a miracle worker of a whole other kind, and the seeds or 'hearts' from the hemp plant offer an excellent source of non-animal protein.

They have a rich nutty flavor and they're loaded with protein, fiber, iron, zinc and magnesium. Two tablespoons of hemp hearts contain 6 grams of protein or about as much protein as one large egg, and they're a great addition to salads, smoothies, muffins, oatmeal or on cooked veggies.

Lentils

Beans and legumes have always been a big source of protein for vegans and vegetarians alike, but did you know that lentils pack one of the biggest punches in terms of protein? Lentils come in many varieties including French green, red and yellow and can be found whole or split.

Not only does half a cup of lentils contain approximately 9 grams of protein but it's also an excellent source of thiamine, iron, folate, zinc and phosphorus. Because lentils have high amounts of resistant starch, they have a favorable effect on blood glucose levels, this fact makes them a great option not only for vegans and vegetarians but also those managing diabetes.

Spirulina

Like lentils, spirulina contains all nine essential amino acids, and 1 tablespoon contains about 4 grams of protein. In addition, spirulina is also an excellent source of calcium, which is important since vegans typically do not consume dairy. While spirulina lacks vitamin B12, it does contain other B vitamins as well as iron and niacin. It has a mild taste which makes it easy to add into smoothies or sprinkle on other foods.

Peas

Ah the humble pea... once pushed around on dinner plates everywhere, peas are a nutritional powerhouse not to be underestimated! They're high in fiber and provide essential nutrients including vitamin A, K and B-6 as well as iron, magnesium and phosphorus. One cup of these little green gems contains about 5 grams of protein.

For this reason, they make an excellent source of vegan protein and you'll often find that vegan protein supplement powders contain pea protein. But why not go straight to the source?

Brown Rice

Rice seems to have gotten a bit of a bad rap in recent years and while white rice may leave a lot to be desired in the way of nutritional substance, brown rice is a whole different story. Brown rice is a whole grain and contains all of the wonderful nutrients that are removed in the process to make white rice.

One cup of cooked brown rice contains 4.5 grams of protein and is an excellent source of iron, fiber, B vitamins and magnesium.

Sunflower Seeds

You're likely no stranger to sunflower seeds, but if you're like us, you only really eat them because they're found in a lot of breads, muesli and cereal bars. Many of us rarely seek out sunflower seeds on their own, but you'll have good reason to after reading this. Sunflower seeds are an excellent source of vegan protein as 1/4 cup contains 6 grams of protein, as well as fiber, B vitamins, iron, folate, zinc and vitamin E.

They're widely known as a healthy fat and they also contain phytosterols which have been linked to lower cholesterol levels. Sunflower seeds are great eaten as a snack all on their own, but they can also be sprinkled on salads and added to your favorite granola. Or for something different, look for sunflower seed butter in your supermarket or health food store. Spread it on toast or sandwiches just as you would any type of nut butter.

Nut Butters

Nuts are a popular choice for healthy fats and non-animal protein, and while peanut butter may be a childhood favorite, there are tons of other nut butters out there that pack a much better nutritional punch. Almond butter for example provides 6.5 grams of protein in just two tablespoons, and not only that, but almond butter contains less than half the amount of saturated fat as peanut butter. It's also higher in fiber, iron and calcium.

Steer clear of nut butters that contain added sugars or poor-quality oils and keep them in the fridge for optimum freshness..

Quinoa:

Quinoa is a complete protein with all 9 amino acids. It is fast to cook and makes wonderful side dish with any protein, salads (cold or hot), veggie burgers, and many other dishes. Make sure to wash the quinoa in a fine mesh strainer before cooking.

Buckwheat:

Buckwheat is actually a seed that is high in both protein and fiber, with 100g providing about 5g of protein, and it's also gluten-free. Buckwheat is becoming increasingly popular and can be found as flakes, groats, pasta and flours making it an excellent addition to a vegan diet.

Oats:

Oats are a complex carbohydrate, providing slow energy release, they are also an excellent source of protein packing 10g per 100g. If you are gluten sensitive, you need to look for gluten free oats. The best oats are rolled or steel cut oats.