

As scientists started to investigate how much protein is required to support body growth, people began to stress about their protein consumption around the beginning of the twentieth century. Meat and dairy products were seen as the best sources of protein as they got emphasized more and more as a crucial nutrient to include in a diet. Vegetarians questioned the reliance on animal-based protein sources by stressing the importance of a plant-based diet, which has the potential to provide all the essential nutrients along with protein to be healthy. They pushed back against the idea by raising awareness of the negative health consequences of overconsuming protein and following diets with animal-based products as the source of protein. Since meat and dairy products were available sources of protein at the time, as scientists continued to stress its importance in the diet, protein came to be synonymous with these foods. As excessive consumption of protein has been associated with health issues, vegetarians have fought back against this narrative by promoting plant-based diets as a better alternative.

The emphasis on the importance of protein increased around the twentieth century when scientists moved from highlighting calories and vitamins to protein. The most readily available sources of protein were meat and dairy due to the “excess production of these foods after World War II,”<sup>1</sup> which led to the belief that these foods were essential to maintain a healthy diet. People started to consume more protein to stay healthy in fear of malnourishment, which allowed the government to deal with the surplus of meat and dairy. As the consumption of protein increased, companies started advertising protein powder and shakes that would boost the customer's nutrient levels. They used people with an active build, like athletes and models, to market their products to give the audience "a sense of optimism toward protein consumption and fitness."<sup>2</sup> By

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<sup>1</sup>Gyorgy Scrinis. “The Era of Quantifying Nutritionism: Protective Nutrients, Caloric Reductionism, and Vitamania.” *Nutritionism: The Science and Politics of Dietary Advice*. New York: Columbia University Press (2013). (Page. 56).

<sup>2</sup>O’Hagan. “Fresh-Formers or Fads? Historicizing the Contemporary Protein-Enhanced Food Trend.” (Page. 11).

seeing these types of advertisements, people started to become obsessed with their protein intake because they wanted to achieve the bodies shown in the protein ads. While there were plenty of protein sources available, overconsuming protein has led to many health complications.

Overconsumption of protein, especially from animal sources, has been related to a number of health issues as the fascination with protein has grown. Studies have shown that a high-protein diet has been linked to being “harmful to the kidneys and liver”<sup>3</sup> because excess protein intake can put a strain on the kidney, which leads to kidney failure and other diseases, and excess amino acid from protein destroys the liver. A diet with meat as the main source of protein, especially processed and red meat, is filled with unhealthy saturated and trans-fat along with cholesterol, which increases the risk of heart problems.<sup>4</sup> Not only does excess meat consumption lead to heart complications, but it also leads to “gout, rheumatism, and other ‘uric acid disorders.’”<sup>5</sup> These health issues emphasize the value of proportionality and a balanced diet, which includes taking protein in levels that are suitable to a person's nutritional requirements. While a plant-based diet has low protein, it gives the right balance of protein and other essential nutrients needed for a healthy diet.

A plant-based diet has become more popular as a healthier option than conventional diets that use more animal products. This diet places a focus on foods that are not processed, like fruits, vegetables, whole grains, legumes, and nuts, which have been associated with numerous health advantages. People that followed vegetarianism argued that following a plant-based diet “could provide enough protein to maintain good health.”<sup>6</sup> To main good health, it is important to have a healthy gut microbiome, and that can be achieved by following a plant-based diet because

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<sup>3</sup>O’Hagan. “Fresh-Formers or Fads? Historicizing the Contemporary Protein-Enhanced Food Trend.” (Page. 3).

<sup>4</sup>Shprintzen. *The Vegetarian Crusade: The Rise of an American Reform Movement 1817-1921*. (Page. 124)

<sup>5</sup>Ogle. *In Meat We Trust: AN Unexpected History of Carnivore America*. (Page. 86)

<sup>6</sup>Warren. *Meat Makes People Powerful: A Global History of the Modern Era*. (Page. 49)

it is rich in fiber.<sup>7</sup> Following a plant-based diet is a healthier choice than a typical diet that uses animal products as its primary source of protein since it has health benefits, which is lowering the risk of chronic illnesses.

In conclusion, because meat and dairy products were readily available in the late 1800s, protein came to be associated with these foods. With the rise of strategy marketing, the widespread belief that animal products were the most nutrient-dense and generally available source of protein. Vegetarians, on the other hand, combated this myth by endorsing plant-based diets as a healthy substitute. They contended that plant-based protein sources were as nourishing and could offer all the essential amino acids required for a balanced diet. As much as having protein in a diet is important, it is also equally important to include other nutrients to avoid experiencing health complications. Furthermore, consuming too much protein from animals has been related to a number of health issues.

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<sup>7</sup>O'Connor. "The Best Foods to Feed Your Gut Microbiome."

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