Power Your Body with the Right Protein Choices

***By Dr Chin Yit Siew**, Nutritionist & Honorary Secretary, Nutrition Society of Malaysia &*
***Dr Roseline Yap**, Nutritionist & Honorary Treasurer, Nutrition Society of Malaysia*

According to the Malaysian Adult Nutrition Survey (MANS) 2024, over 83% of adults meet their daily protein requirements. This means that we aren't necessarily a protein-deficient nation. However, only 3% meet the recommended intake for legumes and nuts, indicating that most people rely heavily on animal-based sources such as meat, poultry, eggs, fish, and seafood. Achieving optimal health isn't about eating more chicken or steak – it's about choosing a better mix of protein sources to fuel a long and vibrant life.

The Nutritional Powerhouse: Animal Proteins

Animal-based proteins, such as poultry, fish, eggs, and dairy, are referred as "complete" proteins. This is because they contain all nine essential amino acids that the human body cannot produce on its own. Beyond amino acids, animal proteins are rich in vital micronutrients that are more easily absorbed by the body than their plant-based counterparts:

- **Iron & zinc:** Essential for oxygen transport in the blood and immune function.
- **Vitamin B12:** Crucial for nerve function and the production of DNA and red blood cells.

The focus must be on lean choices without the baggage of excess saturated fat or sodium. Opting for skinless poultry, fish, and lean cuts of beef or lamb ensures you get the nutrients without the caloric overhead. Conversely, the "hidden" danger in the Malaysian diet often lies in processed meats. Sausages, nuggets, and salted meats are frequently linked to increased risks of heart disease and certain cancers due to their high preservative and sodium content. For a stronger body, keep these as occasional treats rather than daily staples, avoid if you can.

The Earth's Bounty: Plant-Based Proteins

Plant proteins are the unsung heroes of longevity. Foods like tempeh, tofu, dhal (lentils), beans, and nuts offer something that animal products cannot: fibre and a massive array of antioxidants. The high fibre content in plant proteins supports a healthy gut microbiome and aids in digestion. Furthermore, plant-based diets are consistently linked to lower blood cholesterol levels and a reduced risk of cardiovascular disease.

In Malaysia, we are fortunate to have affordable staples like tempeh and tofu. These soy-based products are not only excellent protein sources but also contain isoflavones, which may protect against various age-related diseases.

The "Power Mix" Concept

The secret to a resilient body is the "Power Mix", combining plant and animal proteins within your daily meals to achieve a superior nutritional profile. This can be done by aiming to consume a variety of fish, lean meat, poultry, or eggs daily to get your animal protein supply, and at the same time, have at least one serving of legumes daily (e.g. tempeh, tofu, dhal) and a handful of nuts four times a week to fulfil your plant-based protein intake.

By mixing sources, you ensure a diverse intake of vitamins and minerals. For example, while a piece of fish provides B12, the dhal served alongside it provides the fibre and folate that the fish lacks. This synergy doesn't just make your meals more nutritionally complete; it makes them more satisfying and culturally rich.

Easy Everyday Strategies

- **Practise "quarter-quarter-half":** A simple rule of thumb is to portion your plate according to this formula:
    - **1/4 plate:** Protein (fish, poultry, meat, or legumes)
    - **1/4 plate:** Carbohydrates (brown rice, wholemeal bread)
    - **1/2 plate:** Fruits and vegetables
- **Spread your protein intake:** Add an egg to your morning oats or have a handful of nuts as a snack to help maintain a steady supply of amino acids for your muscles throughout the day.
- **The “plus one” rule:** When making a chicken curry or beef stew, add a cup of chickpeas or lentils. You’ll use less meat, save money, and increase the fibre content.
- **Cooking methods:** Move away from deep-frying. Grilling, steaming, or poaching proteins preserves their nutritional integrity and prevents the addition of unhealthy *trans*-fats.
- **Smart snacking:** Instead of biscuits, reach for unsalted roasted peanuts or edamame.

Conclusion: Quality Over Quantity

A strong, healthy body is not built through excessive protein shakes or oversized portions of meat. It is constructed through balance and variety. By embracing both the complete amino acid profiles of animal proteins and the fibre-rich, heart-healthy benefits of plant proteins, you provide your body with the full spectrum of tools it needs to thrive. Remember: don't just eat more protein – eat better protein. Your muscles, your heart, and your future self will thank you.

*****

This article is contributed by Nutrition Month Malaysia (NMM) 2026, an annual community nutrition education initiative jointly organised by Nutrition Society of Malaysia (NSM), the Malaysian Dietitians’ Association (MDA) and the Malaysian Society of Body Composition (MSBC).

Nutrition Month Malaysia is back with an exciting Food-Fit-Fun Fair in Sunway Velocity Mall Cheras this coming 4 – 7 June 2026! Bring your family and join us for fun engaging activities, free nutrition screening and dietary advice from nutritionists and dietitians and grab goodies from our exhibitors. Find out how everyone in family can realise their health and wellness goals for a healthier life. For more information visit, https://www.nutritionmonthmalaysia.org.my