Holistic Healthcare of Virginia
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High-Protein Diets

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Today many high protein diets are being touted as effective weight-loss strategies, while restricted diets such as vegetarian, vegan and raw food diets are often thought of as healthier. However, over- or under-consumption of protein is not without consequences and dieters must be cautious to maintain health and reduce risk of disease.

The U.S. Government has given the daily recommendation for protein intake at 10-35% and those on a high-protein diet usually far exceed this putting themselves at risk for heart disease, cancer and kidney function (Insel, Turner & Ross, 2014). During protein metabolism, ammonia (-NH3) which is toxic to our cells is released and moves into the bloodstream as a waste product. It gets carried to the liver, goes through the urea cycle, gets converted to urea and moves from the liver to the kidneys to be excreted in the urine. If there is too much protein, the kidneys can become strained (Insel, 2014).

A link between mineral losses, particularly calcium and a high-protein diet has been studied which may be a factor in diseases such as osteoporosis (Insel, 2014). High-protein foods are also generally high in fat, therefore consuming large quantities of protein, especially if this causes a sacrifice of fruits, vegetables and grains, may result in increased weight (Insel, 2014). Other diseases associated with too much protein include heart disease, cancer (particularly colon) and gout (Insel, 2014).

Deficiencies of protein happen more in non-industrialized countries, but in the U.S. occurs in poverty, older adults, patients with anorexia nervosa, AIDS, cancer or those with malabsorption syndromes (Insel, 2014). In the U.S., those on restricted diets such as raw foods or vegan diets and even some vegetarians who are not careful with combining foods to obtain a "whole" protein may be at risk for protein deficiency. The more restricted the diet, the greater the chance, or the less one is watching their food combining, the greater the risk. A quick rule of thumb to make a whole protein is to combine a grain with a bean or legume (e.g., beans and rice (Insel, 2014).

Source:
Insel, P., Ross, D., McMahon, K., Bernstein, M. (2014). Nutrition, 5th Ed. Burlington, MA: Jones & Bartlett Learning. Chapter 6.