How to Pick the Right Protein Supplement

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Whether you are considering bariatric surgery or have already had it, meeting the daily protein requirement is going to be an important part of your life. It is not uncommon for many patients to fall short of meeting this requirement by ingesting "regular" foods for a variety of reasons. This is where protein supplementation can come in handy. With so many brands, types of protein powder and shakes to choose from it's easy to feel overwhelmed in deciding which product is best for you. Not all products are created equal and knowing what to look for and what to avoid is the difference between enjoying your shake and spending time in the bathroom trying to recover from it.

The Types of Protein

The source of protein in your shake can be derived from a variety of foods. It can come from animal sources such as milk (whey) and eggs. There are two kinds of whey protein—whey protein concentrate and whey protein isolate. Products can have one or the other, or a combination of the two. If you are lactose intolerant (likely to happen after gastric bypass surgery), you may tolerate products with whey protein isolate more so than whey protein concentrate. Protein can come from plant sources – soy, rice, hempseed, spirulina (blue-green algae) and peas. The most popular shakes are made from whey protein isolate, whey protein concentrate, soy protein or even some combination of whey and soy.

How much protein do they provide?

This varies depending on the brand. Read the label to determine the serving size and amount of protein per serving. Choose a product with at least 15 grams of protein. The general recommendation of daily protein is 60-80 grams per day, but can vary, so follow the recommendations of your physician. If you have two shakes per day with 15 grams of protein each mixed with water, you’ll have taken in 30 grams. If you mix protein powder that has 15 grams of protein with one cup skim or Lactaid® milk, your resulting shake will be even higher in protein, 23 grams. Then two shakes would provide 46 grams per day.

Added sugar

Sugar is used by most manufacturers as filler and will vary depending on the brand. A protein powder with lots of sugar will tend to be more palatable, but can cause dumping syndrome after gastric bypass surgery. Choose a brand with the least amount of sugar possible. You can use unflavored (i.e., unsweetened) protein powder to make a shake and it can also be added to soups or broths in small amounts. Follow your doctor’s recommendations as opinions vary.

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Added fat
This also varies from brand to brand. A low-fat, reduced-energy diet is the best studied weight-loss dietary strategy and is frequently recommended by governing health authorities. Too much fat can cause dumping syndrome in the same way too much sugar can, and it also supplies excess calories. Read the label for the number of grams of total fat and choose a brand with 5 grams or less.

The best protein shakes/protein powders have:
- 14 to 25 grams of protein;
- 150 to 250 calories;
- less than 15 grams of sugar (sugar-free is preferred);
- less than five grams of fat;
- a short list of ingredients; and
- are made from a protein source you like the taste of and can tolerate (most likely whey, soy or egg).

References: