

Sports Nutrition I

Protein/Amino Acids

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In recent years there has been increasing interest in the use of protein supplements or amino acids by athletes, especially body builders. On the whole, protein consumption in this country is adequate for most individuals. However, because of the increased physical demands an athlete places on his or her body, increased levels of protein and/or amino acids are necessary and may be beneficial to performance.

When a protein-containing food is eaten, such as meat, it is broken down in the mouth and stomach, then passed into the intestinal tract, where the protein is absorbed into the bloodstream. The basic components of protein are called amino acids. About three quarters of the body's solids are made up of proteins. They make up tissue, enzymes, genes, help transport oxygen and cause muscular contraction. The body produces most of its own proteins but some must come from food. These proteins are present in many foods, such as meats, fruits, vegetables and dairy products.

Amino acid supplementation is most advantageous in the athlete who has a specific need to reduce body fat, such is the case in the sport of body building. Supplementation would be less important for the endurance athlete. One common misconception associated with protein and amino acids is that they can build muscle mass or increase strength without having to exercise. This is not true.

The potential benefits of amino acids, whether ingested in the diet or taken in supplement form, include: increased lean muscle growth and energy output, accelerated muscle repair for recuperation and muscle growth, stimulation of growth hormone, enhanced oxygen and fatty acid fuel use and stabilization of blood sugar, to name a few.

The need for protein and amino acids is great in a healthy functioning body. The use of a proper diet and supplementation, as needed, will promote the best athletic function.

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