



Mott Poll Report

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Teens and Protein

Protein is part of a healthy diet, but it can be hard for parents to tell if their child is consuming the right amount of protein. The C.S. Mott Children's Hospital National Poll on Children's Health asked a national sample of parents about protein intake and supplements for their teens 13-17 years old.

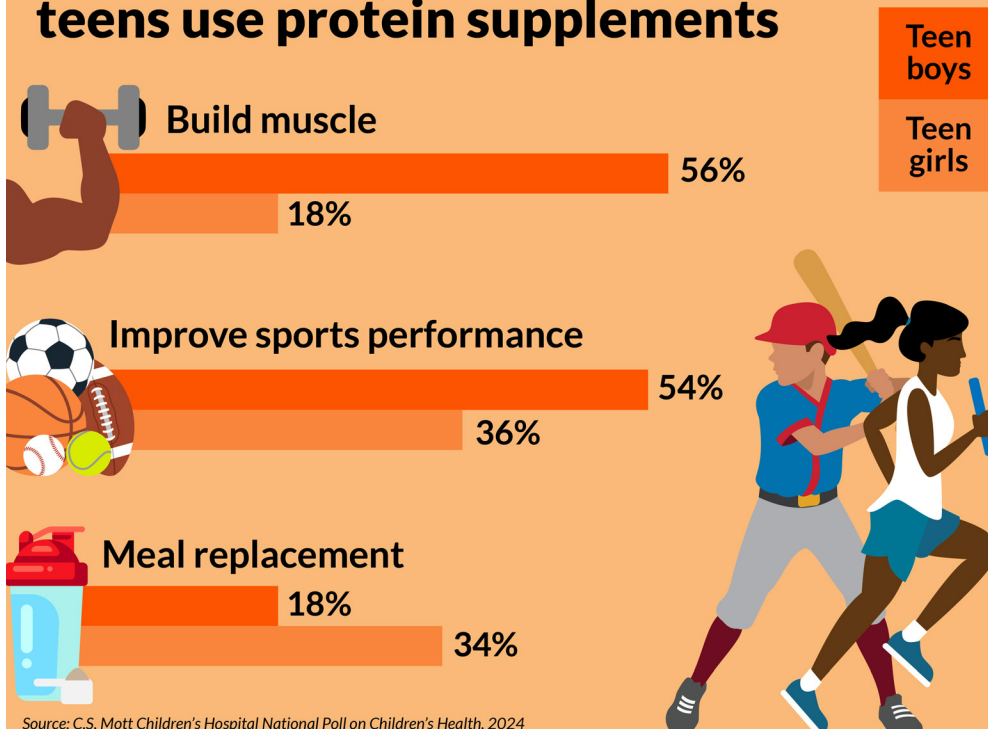
Two in five parents, and more parents of teen boys than parents of teen girls, say that in the past year their teen has consumed protein supplements (46% boys vs 36% girls; 41% overall), including protein bars (31% boys vs 27% girls; 29% overall), shakes (28% boys vs 19% girls; 23% overall), or powder (20% boys vs 10% girls; 15% overall), or followed a high-protein diet (7% boys vs 2% girls; 4% overall). Among those who report their teen takes supplements, more parents of boys than girls report their teen consumes protein supplements every or most days (31% boys vs 15% girls; 23% overall).

More parents of boys say their teen consumes protein supplements to build muscle (56% boys vs 18% girls; 38% overall) and improve sports training/performance (54% boys vs 36% girls; 46% overall), while more parents of girls believe supplements are used to replace a meal when they are too busy to eat (18% boys vs 34% girls; 26% overall), eat a balanced diet (14% boys 26% girls; 20% overall), and help with weight loss (6% boys vs 11% girls; 9% overall).

Among parents whose teen consumed protein supplements, 44% say they or another family member encouraged protein supplements, along with coaches or trainers (26%), other students (21%), social media (10%), and healthcare providers (9%). Parents are more likely to say their teen uses protein supplements if they also perceive any of the following are *very important* to their teen: getting in shape, losing weight, looking attractive, improving sports performance, and being healthy in general.

Two-thirds of parents think the amount of protein their teen is taking in is about right (67%), while others think it is too little (18%), too much (1%), or are unsure (14%). Over half of parents (59%) think a high-protein diet is healthy for their teen. One-third of parents (33%) use protein supplements themselves; these parents are more likely to report their teen also consumes protein supplements (54% vs 18%).

Parent-reported reasons that teens use protein supplements



Report Highlights

Nearly 1 in 5 parents think their teen does not get enough protein.

2 in 5 parents say their teen has consumed protein supplements in the past year; this is higher for teen boys than girls.

1 in 3 parents use protein supplements themselves and are more likely to report their teen also consumes protein supplements.

Data Source & Methods

This report presents findings from a nationally representative household survey conducted exclusively by Ipsos Public Affairs, LLC (Ipsos) for C.S. Mott Children's Hospital. The survey was administered in August 2024 to a randomly selected, stratified group of adults who were parents of at least one child age 1-17 years living in their household (n=2,010). Adults were selected from Ipsos's web-enabled KnowledgePanel® that closely resembles the U.S. population. The sample was subsequently weighted to reflect population figures from the Census Bureau. The survey completion rate was 67% among panel members contacted to participate. This report is based on responses from 989 parents with at least one child age 13-17. The margin of error for results presented in this report is ± 1 to 7 percentage points.

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Implications

Protein is essential to building and strengthening muscle, growing healthy skin and organs, hormone production, and boosting immunity. In general, the Recommended Dietary Allowance (RDA) for protein is 46 grams per day for teenage girls and 52 grams per day for teenage boys, but each person's optimal amount of protein will vary by age, sex, weight, and level of physical activity.

Two-thirds of parents in this Mott Poll felt their teen consumes the right amount of protein. Too much or too little protein can be problematic. Long periods of too little protein can cause muscle loss, tiredness, or worsened mood swings. Extended periods of consuming too much protein can result in nausea, dehydration, stomach pain, or kidney problems.

In general, most teens can get enough protein through a well-balanced diet. However, it can be challenging for parents to ensure their teen is getting the right amount of protein. To do so, parents need to be aware of foods that contain protein, including eggs, nuts, fish, lean meats, lentils, and dairy products, and serve them regularly as part of a balanced diet.

This Mott Poll indicates that many teens consume protein bars and shakes as a meal replacement. For example, when teens are sleepy and uninterested in eating breakfast, well-meaning parents may send their teen to school with what they believe is a healthy alternative. However, higher protein does not necessarily mean healthier; many high-protein products contain excessive amounts of added sugar and caffeine that are unhealthy for teens. Parents can read product labels to find options that contain some protein along with fiber and other nutrients, with little or no added sugar.

This Mott Poll also highlights that many teens use protein supplements, particularly protein powders, to improve their athletic performance and/or build muscle. When a teen engages in strenuous exercise, some of the muscle cells break down; protein helps repair this damage (often called "recovery") and rebuilds muscle. For this reason, teens who participate in strenuous physical activity require more protein than the RDA. The best way to consume the additional protein is through a balanced diet. In certain situations, protein powder may be used as a supplement, but it does not negate the need for the teen to consume protein through a balanced diet. In addition, it is important for parents and teens to remember that eating more protein than your body needs will not result in larger or faster muscle gains.

When teens and parents are considering protein supplements because they cannot achieve the intake they need through their diet, they may be overwhelmed with the choices, including different types of protein supplements such as whey and casein that convey different benefits. Parents and teens may want to consult with the teen's primary care provider or a nutritionist to determine which products would best fit with the teen's goals, as well as the appropriate amount and schedule to take the supplements.

About 1 in 10 parents in this Mott Poll indicated their teen uses protein supplements to help with weight loss. High-protein/low-carb diets are popular with many adults, and over half of parents think a high-protein diet is healthy for their teen. Thus, it's no surprise that some teens will attempt this type of diet. However, high-protein diets are not generally recommended for teens, since there is a risk they will not get all the essential nutrients, including carbohydrates, that they need for a balanced diet.

Teens following a vegetarian or vegan diet may have difficulty consuming enough protein through their regular diet because only certain plant foods (e.g., soy and quinoa) are good sources of complete proteins. However, this issue can be readily addressed by eating a variety of plant foods throughout the day that in combination will provide the body with the building blocks needed to meet protein needs. Furthermore, low-fat dairy options such as Greek yogurt are good sources of protein that can be incorporated into vegetarian diets.