Who can blame them? As protein supplement ads raise consumers' expectations about results, why wouldn't weight trainers feel confused about natural proteins? Sure, egg whites and chicken breasts are loaded with protein but, in this age of instant gratification and cheap deals, it's easy to get carried away by product hype. Here are four common protein questions and answers that may help clear up a client's confusion.

Question: I want to bulk up. I've started drinking three protein shakes per day between meals. Is this enough or too much?
Answer: To determine how many protein shakes your client needs, you should first determine how much protein his/her body can actually use. The client needs adequate protein to enhance muscle growth; excess protein is unlikely better.

Most exercise scientists agree 1 gram of protein per pound of body weight per day is a very generous protein allowance for athletes building muscle mass. (More likely, 0.5 to 0.75g protein per pound will do the job if the athlete eats plenty of calories—but let's be generous.) This means a novice 180-pound body builder gets more than enough protein with 180 grams of protein per day. He or she can easily consume that much with one quart of skim milk, two cans of tuna (i.e., two sandwiches at lunch), and one hefty (8 ounces) piece of beef, chicken or fish at dinner. Consuming protein shakes on top of this simply adds (expensive) calories. He or she could more wisely get the calories from carbs to fuel the workouts.

Question: Is the protein in designer shakes more effective than egg whites, tuna, chicken and other standard foods?
Answer: With names like Protein Revolution and N-Large, the commercial protein products can leave one wondering if standard foods are an equal match. Plus, ads that rave "extremely bioavailable," "no cheap protein blends" and "highest quality protein" leave the impression that tuna or milk don't quite make the grade. Doubtful.

The protein from natural foods works perfectly fine. Any animal protein is "high quality" and contains all the essential amino acids you need to build muscles. Hence, eating balanced meals and then drinking protein shakes for "high quality protein" is an outrageous concept—and expensive. The $32 one may spend on protein supplement packets could instead buy lots of powdered milk—the least expensive protein powder around. It's
not only a high quality protein, but also a complete package of life-sustaining nutrition that is perfectly balanced by nature (infants live on milk).

In an overall well-balanced diet, engineered protein offers no advantages over beef, chicken, eggs, fish, milk and other standard protein-rich foods. As long as the athlete has a fully functioning intestinal tract, he/she can stop fretting about being able to digest or utilize protein. Advertisements lead athletes to believe “fast-acting” whey is best, but scientists suggest that slowly digested casein (a protein found in milk) offers a sustained release that is preferable for building muscles for the long term.

Question: Should I refuel with a protein shake after my workout?

Answer: No. An athlete should refuel with a carb shake that has a little protein. An athlete’s body needs a foundation of carbohydrates to refuel muscles. While about 20 to 25 grams of protein after a workout optimizes muscle growth, consuming excess protein displaces carbs. A hard weight workout (3 sets of 8 to 10 reps) can reduce glycogen stores by about 35 percent.

If the athlete trains hard every week with a low-carb diet, his/her workouts will suffer. For well-fueled muscles, an athlete should target 3 to 5 grams carbohydrate per pound of body weight. For an athlete who weighs 150 pounds, that’s about 150 to 200 grams carbohydrate per pound of body weight. For an athlete who weighs 150 pounds, that’s about 150 to 200 grams carbohydrate per pound of body weight. For an athlete who weighs 150 pounds, that’s about 150 to 200 grams carbohydrate per pound of body weight.

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A chocolate milk drink (10 ounce) would be a better bet than a canned protein shake, which offers around 64 grams fat not only enhanced muscle protein deposition but also reported 33 percent fewer total medical visits; 28 percent fewer visits due to muscle and joint problems; and 83 percent fewer visits due to heat exhaustion compared to those who drank plain water. As little as 100 calories of a recovery drink can make a strong impact on health, muscle soreness and hydration. The message is clear: Proper fueling at the right times is worth the effort.

Don’t let your clients underestimate the value of refueling soon after exercising. Cereal with milk, fruit yogurt, turkey sandwich or spaghetti with meatballs can do the job. Don’t let a good sports diet be your client’s missing link.

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