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# Protein everywhere! A personal journey

**By Joanne Cleaver**

jycleaver@jycleaver.com

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JOANNE CLEAVER



**P**ardon me while I mix up some chia seed pudding.

I'm told it's a fabulous way to get yet more plant-based protein into my diet. And if I manage to swap a bowl of chia seeds, milk, and a dash of maple syrup for ice cream, I've propelled myself over the protein finish line for the day.

Like many women baby boomers, I've traded tracking calories for tracking protein.

Somehow, I'm supposed to be staving off osteoporosis, building muscle strength and containing calories while

extending cognition and cardiac health ... all through my diet.

It's a lot harder than I thought. Animal meat still packs the most solid protein for the fewest calories, but could inflict cholesterol. Plant protein helps me achieve a wider spectrum of health goals — but according to the dietary rules I followed as a young homemaker, back in the 1980s, packs too much of a caloric punch.

I'm in good company as I try to figure out how to get enough protein for sustainable new habits as middle age fades into early old age. The ongoing discussion at Facebook groups dedicated to older-lady health endlessly chases the same topics: What forms of plant protein best fit into the nutritional regimes we are trying to hammer into habit? How can we eat less, or no, animal meat and shift our default to plant-forward protein? Must we revert to newfangled protein snacks and even shakes to meet the goals our doctors and trainers set for us?

*Why is protein so hard?*

We thought we knew protein. We're the ones, after all, who served our skeptical husbands "complementary proteins" from the thrifty homemaker's 1980's Bible: the "More with Less" cookbook. Compiling wisdom of Mennonite homemakers, "More with Less" preached the gospel of complementary proteins: to get the accurate mix of amino acids from plant sources, we had to eat legumes plus grains, or, legumes plus dairy.

For growing families of hungry kids, protein in the form of carbohydrates was a silver bullet, for both nutrition and the household budget. A couple times a week, we could showcase chops, steaks, fillets and burgers if we offset pricey animal protein with humble complementary proteins every other day.

But now the kids are grown, the food pyramid has been deposed by the "my plate" schematic, and nutritionists have debunked complementary proteins.

"The body is wiser than that," says Jamie Mok, a spokesperson for the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics; nutritionist; and plant protein pro, of the "complementary protein" myth. "The body breaks down food to amino acids and reconstitutes proteins by grabbing amino acids from our system, depending on what it needs."

That is good news to me and my cohort: We can modulate our legumes to contain calories and still gain protein and fiber. But if we largely forego solid-protein animal meat, we have to move protein from its traditional leading actor status to a supporting role in everything we eat.

Right, Mok says, and the way to do that is to “focus on the whole plant, not processed foods. We’re often so focused on protein that we often don’t consider the whole component of the food: Is it high in sugar or added fat? If so, we don’t want to add it to our diet just for the sake of the protein,” she says. Be cognizant of fiber and the other nutrients that hitch a ride with legumes, and achieve nutritional goals over the entire day, not just at three meals.

For plant protein innovators, this protein re-orientation for my influential (we’re not dead yet!) cohort means that competition comes from all directions. Maybe, as I integrate Mok’s advice, I’ll shift some of my protein intake to a midafternoon snack. That’s a new perspective — both relieving the center-plate protein for each meal from carrying the day’s protein goals, and trying to find low-calorie, high-protein snacks (that aren’t cheese or almonds, both of which arrive on a raft of glorious, creamy fat). As I try out plant proteins, my grocery dollar will likely be allotted more evenly to snacks as well as main dishes. I might even start considering dessert as an opportunity for plant protein, as some market prognosticators predict.

A plant protein perspective changes everything, especially for those of us who thought a lifetime of home cooking conveyed a legacy of protein mastery. Our households are smaller now, but our reach is longer, as we reframe family menus for our children and theirs. I’m pretty sure that the chia seed pudding — yes, it’s delicious — will be easily adopted by the three-year-olds in my life as their new favorite, and it might even let me reclaim some nutritional authority.

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