



6 Reasons Athletes Should Opt for Plant Protein Over Animal Protein

By Brenda Davis, RD; Vesanto Melina, RD; and Cory Davis, P.Ag
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***Editor's Note:** The following article is excerpted from Plant-Powered Protein by Brenda Davis, RD; Vesanto Melina, MS, RD; and Cory Davis, MBA P.Ag. Released this spring, Plant-Powered Protein busts protein myths, breaks down complex nutrition science in an easy-to-understand way, and offers cooking tips and recipes to help readers put their knowledge into practice. [Learn more here.](#)*

Plant proteins offer a number of advantages for athletes. Choosing plant-based over animal-based protein-rich foods reduces the risk of chronic disease and obesity. What many athletes fail to realize is that the benefits of plant protein extend to performance as well. These are some of the key advantages.

1. Plant-protein foods improve circulation.

Protein-rich plant foods can reduce plaque buildup in the arteries. They lower blood viscosity and increase arterial elasticity. This improves blood flow. Better blood flow means more oxygen and nutrients to the muscles and better elimination of metabolic waste products.

2. Plant-protein foods reduce inflammation.

Whole plant foods are rich in anti-inflammatory compounds. These foods are our primary sources of protective phytochemicals, antioxidants, vitamin E, and

healthful fats. Animal products tend to have pro-inflammatory effects. Chronic inflammation can cause tissue damage, pain, and fatigue. This can compromise oxygen delivery and hinder athletic performance.

3. Plant-protein foods reduce oxidative stress.

Physical training increases the production of free radicals, which can damage body tissues. When the body manufactures more free radicals than it can neutralize with antioxidants, oxidative stress occurs. Exercise-induced oxidative stress can damage body tissues, resulting in reduced performance and recovery. Athletes need a steady supply of antioxidants from foods. The most potent antioxidants are concentrated in plant foods. These include vitamin E, vitamin C, provitamin A carotenoids, selenium, and many phytochemicals.

4. Plant-protein foods support a healthy gut microbiome.

A healthy, diverse gut microbiome is sustained by fiber, which provides food for the gut bacteria. High-protein plant foods, such as legumes (beans, peas, and lentils), are loaded with fiber, while animal products have none. A healthy gut microbiome has a fundamental role in metabolism, endocrine function, and immune response. It helps with the delivery of water, nutrients, and hormones during exercise.

5. Plant-protein foods promote lean bodies.

Plant foods generally deliver fewer calories for any given volume of food, which may help to explain why plant-based eaters are typically leaner. Lower levels of body fat are associated with improved aerobic capacity and better endurance.

6. Most plant-protein foods help build glycogen stores.

(continued)

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Endurance performance depends on stores of glycogen, which is the body's backup source of fuel derived from carbohydrates. Carbohydrates are also the preferred fuel for our brains. Protein-rich plant foods, such as legumes, also provide high-quality carbohydrates, while meat is devoid of carbohydrates.

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