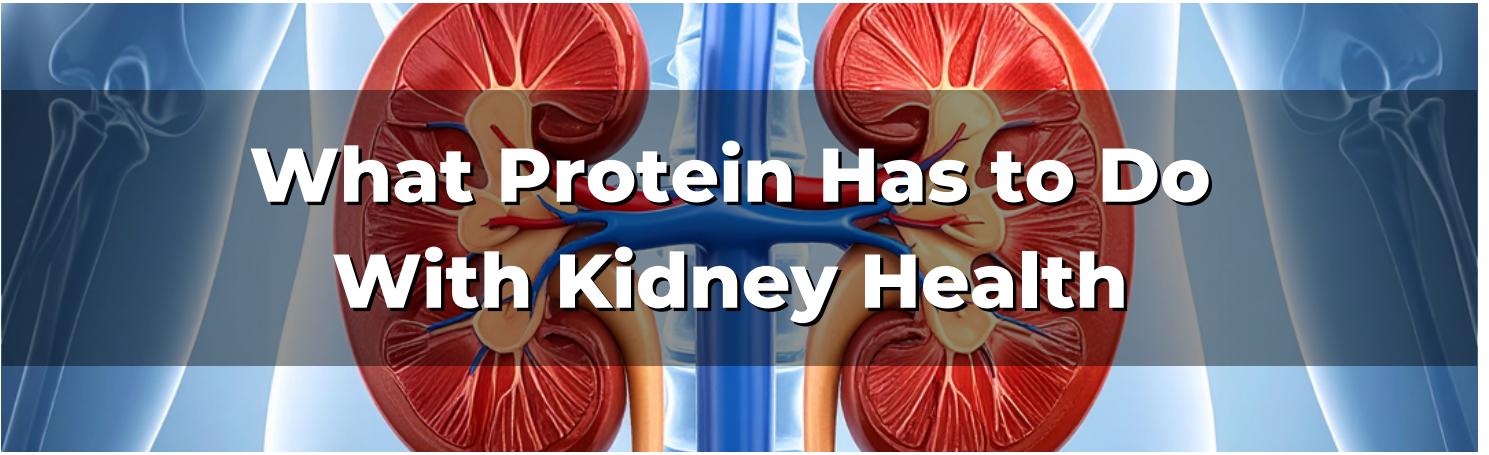




What Protein Has to Do With Kidney Health

March is National Kidney Month, which focuses on raising awareness about kidney disease and the importance of early detection. Today is also World Kidney Day, an international campaign focused on preventing kidney disease and identifying risk early.

Chronic kidney disease affects about 1 in 7 adults in the United States, and many people do not know they have it until the condition is already fairly advanced. Healthy kidneys filter roughly 200 quarts of blood each day, removing waste products, balancing fluids, and helping regulate blood pressure and key minerals. When kidney function declines, waste products accumulate, fluid balance shifts, and blood pressure and mineral levels become harder for the body to control.

Many of the same habits that support heart health also support kidney health. Eating patterns rich in vegetables, whole grains, legumes, fruit, nuts, and seeds are associated with a lower risk of chronic kidney disease and better kidney function over time. This is especially relevant for people with diabetes or high blood pressure, the two leading causes of kidney damage.

Protein is an important part of the kidney health story, and not in the way you may think. Protein is essential for building and repairing tissues, and most people already get enough of it. At the same time, protein has become a pervasive marketing theme. It now shows up in snack foods, drinks, and products that never used to contain it, and the message is always the same: more is better.

From a kidney perspective, the conversation is a little more nuanced. When protein is broken down in the body, the unused portion becomes nitrogen-based waste that the kidneys filter out of the bloodstream. That process is normal, but consistently high protein intake increases the amount of waste the kidneys have to process.

For people with healthy kidneys, this excess nitrogen is rarely a problem, and research on long-term effects is still evolving. For people who already have reduced kidney function, or risk factors such as diabetes or high blood pressure, higher protein intake has been linked with faster decline in kidney function.

The source of that protein also matters. Animal sources such as red meat and processed meats often come with saturated fat, sodium, and compounds that increase the acid load the kidneys must handle. Plant protein sources arrive with a different nutritional package that is much easier on the kidneys. Beans, lentils, tofu, nuts, seeds, and whole grains provide fiber and beneficial minerals, and they create a lower acid load during digestion.

Research consistently finds that eating more plant foods is associated with better kidney function and a lower risk of chronic kidney disease. This pattern also appears in long-lived populations, where beans and legumes are common staples and meat is typically eaten in smaller amounts.

If kidney health is on your radar, a few simple habits can help:

- Add beans or lentils to meals several times each week. Chickpeas, lentils, black beans, and edamame are all good options.
- Try replacing one meat-based meal with a plant-based option during the week.
- Treat processed meats such as bacon, sausage, and deli meats as occasional foods rather than everyday choices.
- Watch sodium intake, since high sodium can increase blood pressure and increase the risk of kidney damage.
- Stay well hydrated so your kidneys can effectively filter waste products.

In a culture that pushes protein at nearly every meal, it is worth stepping back and asking not just how much protein you eat, but what kind. Shifting toward plant-forward protein sources like beans, lentils, tofu, nuts, seeds, and whole grains is one practical way to support long-term kidney health.

Hearty Cabbage and White Bean Soup



This simple, plant-forward soup is built around fiber-rich vegetables and beans, which provide protein along with fiber and minerals in a form that's easier on the kidneys. It's hearty, satisfying, and one of the most affordable meals you can put on the table, coming in at well under \$1.50 per serving. It also tastes a lot better than that price tag suggests.

Ingredients (serves 6):

- 1 large yellow onion, diced
- 2 medium carrots, sliced into discs
- 2 celery ribs, halved lengthwise and sliced
- 1 teaspoon sea salt (omit if you're on a low-sodium diet)
- Ground black pepper to taste
- 2 tablespoons white or red wine vinegar
- 1 28-oz can diced tomatoes
- 1½ quarts (6 cups) low-sodium vegetable broth
- 1 (15-oz) can white kidney or navy beans, drained and rinsed
- 4 garlic cloves, minced
- 2 medium yellow or white potatoes, diced
- 1 small green cabbage (about a pound), roughly chopped
- 1 teaspoon smoked paprika (can omit if you don't have it)
- 1 teaspoon dried thyme

Instructions:

1. Heat olive oil in a large pot over medium heat. Add the onion, carrots, and celery and sauté for 5–6 minutes or until softened. Add garlic and cook for another minute.
2. Stir in the vinegar, tomatoes, smoked paprika, thyme, salt (if using), and pepper.
3. Add the broth, potatoes, and beans and bring to a boil. Reduce heat, add the cabbage, and simmer uncovered for 25–30 minutes until the cabbage and potatoes are tender.
4. Taste and adjust seasoning. Serve warm.

Tip: This soup gets better the next day, making it a good candidate for meal prep. It also freezes well.