

## Protein Bars: To Eat or Not to Eat?

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**Q:** I eat a protein bar every day for breakfast, and sometimes, my kids and I have one for a quick snack in the afternoon. My husband says they are unnatural, full of chemicals and a waste of money. Are these bars really unhealthy, or can I tell my husband to lighten up?

**A:** A protein, or “energy,” bar is a quick, convenient snack. How “healthy” a bar is depends on several factors.

Not all energy bars are the same. Some are high in protein and low in carbohydrates, others are higher in carbs (neither is necessarily preferable). Although some people believe that they need to supplement their diets with extra protein, unless you are under-eating or on a drastically low-calorie diet, chances are you get enough protein already. Vegetables, grains, beans, meat, fish, poultry and dairy products contain protein. Some studies have shown that the average American adult gets up to twice the recommended daily allowance for protein—and that is without trying to eat extra amounts.

If you exercise a lot, especially doing cardio, extra carbohydrates will give you more energy during and after your workouts. Weight lifters often believe they need extra protein, but research shows that most don't. If anything, a body builder may need more carbs to fuel the heavy lifting. After a particularly strenuous and long workout, eating carbs along with a small amount of protein can help replenish energy stores. For example, as well as eating a bar that contains both carbs and protein, you could eat some nuts, a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, fruit with yogurt or eggs and toast.

Some bars contain unhealthy trans fats, often found in partially hydrogenated vegetable oils. Some bars are packed with so much sugar or [high-fructose corn syrup](#) that you might as well be eating a candy bar. Some bars are made with artificial sweeteners. Although these have not been proven to be harmful, are they something you want in your diet every single day? I don't recommend it.

Energy bars are, at best, a supplement to normal food when you need a quick snack or don't have time for a real meal. Should you substitute real food on a regular basis by eating a bar? I don't think so. Fresh food contains so many beneficial plant compounds, some even yet to be identified—you won't get those from a bar or supplement. Even though bars may be low in fat or high in protein or have lots of fiber, they are highly processed. As a rule of thumb, it's a good idea to eat food in its most natural state. Why eat a bar that has added fiber and protein, when you can eat fruit that's naturally packed with fiber or nuts that have protein, carbs, good fats and fiber?

Some people think the bars help them diet. But if you choose nutritious foods you can fill up on more than you'd get in a small bar. For the same 180 calories found in a typical bar, you can eat an omelet made with two egg whites and a half ounce of cheddar cheese along with a banana. Or you can enjoy one cup of nonfat yogurt with a half cup of fresh

blueberries. Or how about a slice of rye toast covered with a quarter-tablespoon of peanut butter along with an orange?

If you're in a hurry, a bar is better than nothing. If you're in the middle of a two-hour bike ride or are doing a mega-cardio workout at the gym and you need an energy infusion, they're great. But given a choice, I'd go for a real meal every time.