

Protein Intake Crucial to Surgery Recovery

If you've been an active, independent adult for most of your life, suddenly finding yourself a patient can be a mixture of frustration and challenge. There are always do's and don'ts following surgery, but good nutrition is crucial to speed wound healing, improve immunity and ensure the best outcome. Susan Mills-Gray, Nutrition Specialist with MU Extension shares, "As a recent knee surgery patient, I planned ahead to make sure that my post-operative diet had plenty of heart-healthy, low-fat protein. Research is conclusive that this one of many tools that increases one's ability to recover quicker." It doesn't matter if you've had a joint replaced; a hysterectomy or a bypass operation, the body requires extra nutrients to heal, so focusing on nutrition can mean the difference between bouncing back and a lengthy recovery.

On average, a person can expect to lose 5 to 10 percent of total body weight after surgery. Protein is needed to repair tissue, slow muscle loss and decrease the inflammatory phase. Recent research has shown good results healing wounds with protein consumption of 0.84 grams of protein per pound of body weight per day. For example, a 180-pound female who had major surgery would need about 150 grams of protein per day (180 x .84). "Keep in mind the average amount of protein for someone this weight is only about 75 grams, so this is a substantial increase," adds Mills-Gray. If you're not sure how much protein you may need, ask to speak with the registered dietician associated with the hospital.

After surgery, medications, fatigue and complications can make eating unappealing. The mouth and throat can be sore or dry, medicine can make food taste metallic, and even the sense of smell can be diminished. In these circumstances, it's best to experiment to see what's the most appealing. Also, eat small portions throughout the day, standard portions can seem overwhelming to someone who does not feel well.

Choose low-fat meats, poultry, fish and dairy, as well as beans, nuts and seeds. Other tips to make meals more desirable include marinating meat to improve flavor; adding herbs or spices (if tolerated) to bland foods; incorporating flavored protein powder into whole-food shakes; and trying hard candy, strong chewing gum or lemonade to relieve dry mouth and perk up taste buds.

For more information, contact your local MU Extension center or this faculty directly at mills-grays@missouri.edu.

(Sources: Tina Ruggiero, M.S., R.D., L.D., USDA, NIH)