

Protein Bars and YOU!

- By Karen McCoy

We have a love affair with protein bars! In recent years, the industry has exploded with all sorts of bars making all sorts of claims.

In my view, most of us eat protein bars for the wrong reasons – we're busy, we got caught in a pinch without having proper food / snacks on hand (we didn't plan well) or we think that a protein bar is going to help us in some way – to lose weight, to build muscle or to cut the cravings.

A lot of these bars were designed with endurance athletes in mind. Because they are portable and high in carbs, they are the perfect food for endurance events lasting more than 2 hours. They keep athletes from "hitting the wall" by providing nutrients that the body needs while exercising. Additionally, they are easy to snack on while training.

A lot of these bars were created by men for men, and for muscle-heads at the gym. Yes, they are a marketer's dream, a dream that used to be directed toward fitness / weight training guys, but now they've become mainstream. Problem is, the health and diet claims have become mainstream too – full of hype and empty promises.



The reality is that most people do not need extra carbohydrates while they exercise. In fact, the reason why we exercise is to burn off extra carbohydrates so that they won't be stored as fat.

It is very important to be clear what your goals are when choosing a protein bar.

- Is it to replace a meal?
- Is it a snack?
- Is it for weight gain?
- Do you want to lose weight/body fat?
- Do you need extra energy for long (2 hours plus) intense training?

All but the 4th reason are ok reasons to choose a protein bar (they will NOT help you to lose weight!), but again, they're fine if you know what your goal is, and it's only once in awhile.

Most of the bars today are loaded with excess sugar and saturated fat. They also lack fiber and other important phytochemicals that keep your body healthy. You would never think that the companies that make these bars and preach about low sugar-low fat diets would actually add those ingredients to their bars. But guess what? They do! Always read the label before you buy any nutritional product.

Here is what you should look for:

Fat

Check to see how much fat is in the bar and what type of fat it is. Many bars contain the “bad” fats and trans fats that can lead to heart disease. Look for good fats like canola oil.

Calories

If you are looking for a snack, the bar should contain 150 calories and under. To replace a meal, the bar could have 300 calories. Remember the bar’s purpose is to supply your body with the same nutrients that a meal would supply.

Protein

What type of protein does the bar contain? Whey is the best source. Look for at least 15 grams to help you reach your goal of at least 100-150 grams of protein per day. And I’d always go for a whey isolate protein as commercial soy is highly sprayed, highly genetically modified and can hurt our thyroid gland. So if you want soy, make sure it’s organic.

Carbohydrates

Always look for complex carbohydrates like brown rice and other natural sources like fruit or fruit juices.

Sugar

Look for the lowest number that you can find. If a bar contains, let’s say, 36 grams of carbohydrates and has 30 grams of sugar, you can be pretty sure that almost all of the carbs come from sugar. Most people eat protein bars to improve their diet, not to add more sugar to it.

Remember that sugar alcohols may be listed elsewhere on the label, so be sure to check for them. Try to keep sugar grams to no more than 5% of the bars total calories.

Fiber

Some fiber is better than no fiber. See if you can find a bar that has at least some fiber to help to get you to your goal of 30 grams per day.

Sugar Alcohols

Sugar alcohols do not have to be listed as a carb on the label, so your bar could have a lot more carbs than you think. Even bars that claim to have no carbs may contain high amounts of carbs. Bar companies get away with this by calling them “sugar alcohols”; but this is just a way to disguise carbohydrates.

What do I do in a pinch?

I choose one of several bars (from the Health Food Store) in my video – Protein bars and YOU! only on occasion. It’s in my glove compartment just in case (usually they go bad before I eat them). I’d rather throw back a scoop of protein powder and some water...so I always travel with a supply of protein and a shaker cup in my car. It’s really no more trouble...I just need to stop for a glass of water which is easy to find! (I usually have lots on hand anyway, as I carry around my water bottle wherever I go).

Make sure you watch the accompanying **Protein Bars and YOU!** video for my take on what bars are good, bad, and downright ugly!