Sarcopenia: what it means and what to ask

Sarcopenia is a condition of the muscles. It can be checked with simple tests, and food and activity are part of the conversation with your care team.

What sarcopenia means

- Doctors look first at muscle strength. Low strength suggests sarcopenia, and a measure of muscle size or quality confirms it. A clinician also checks physical performance to assess how severe it is.[1]
- It is common in older age, but it can begin earlier in life.[1] Illness, time spent in bed or less active, and eating too little can all add to it.[1]
- It matters because it can make moving around harder and raises the risk of falls and fractures.[2]

Protein and activity

1. **Protein** in everyday food
2. **Amino acids**, the building blocks your body absorbs
3. **New muscle protein**, made with the help of regular activity

Your body breaks the protein in food into amino acids and uses them to make new muscle protein. Experts consider protein plus regular activity the best combination for keeping muscles working.[3]

- Ask your clinician for a daily protein target. Expert guidance commonly recommends 1.0 to 1.2 g/kg for older adults, and 1.2 to 1.5 g/kg with illness.[3,4]

- Protein comes from foods such as fish, eggs, milk and yogurt, beans and lentils, poultry, meat, tofu and nuts.
- Some people should not eat more protein, such as people with severe kidney disease who are not on dialysis.[4] Ask before you change how much protein you eat.
- Experts recommend physical activity for all older adults, at a level that is safe for each person.[3,4] Strength exercise is the main approach for sarcopenia today, but it does not suit everyone, so ask what is right for you.[2]

When to talk with a clinician

Talk with your doctor, nurse or dietitian if you notice any of these:

- ☐ Getting up from a chair, climbing stairs or carrying a bag of shopping is harder than it was[1]
- ☐ Walking more slowly, or needing help to walk across a room[1]
- ☐ A fall in the past year[1]
- ☐ Losing weight without trying[5]
- ☐ Eating less, or feeling full sooner than before[5]
- ☐ Feeling weaker, or taking a long time to recover from illness[5]

DO NOT WAIT FOR AN APPOINTMENT

Contact your doctor promptly if you are losing weight without trying or have trouble swallowing. If someone is choking, cannot breathe or suddenly seems very unwell, call 911.

Questions for your appointment

- [ ] Could my muscle strength be checked, for example with a grip test or a chair-rise test?[1]
- [ ] How much protein should I aim for each day? Is there any reason for me to limit it?
- [ ] What kind of activity is safe for me, and how often?
- [ ] Would a dietitian or a physical therapist help?
- [ ] Could any of my medicines be affecting my appetite or taste?
- [ ] What changes should make me call before my next visit?

My own questions

ABOUT THIS HANDOUT

General education for patients and families, prepared by CORUS. It does not describe or recommend any product, and it is not medical advice. More at takecorus.com/families.

SOURCES

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2 Sayer AA, et al. Sarcopenia. Nat Rev Dis Primers. 2024;10(1):68. doi:10.1038/s41572-024-00550-w

3 Deutz NE, et al. Protein intake and exercise for optimal muscle function with aging: ESPEN Expert Group. Clin Nutr. 2014;33(6):929-936. doi:10.1016/j.clnu.2014.04.007

4 Bauer J, et al. Optimal dietary protein intake in older people (PROT-AGE). J Am Med Dir Assoc. 2013;14(8):542-559. doi:10.1016/j.jamda.2013.05.021

5 NHS (UK): Malnutrition: symptoms and Unintentional weight loss. National Institute on Aging: Overcoming roadblocks to healthy eating.