

Health-conscious middle class and Gen Z drive demand for protein

Nearly half of adults in the UK have increased their protein intake in the past year, boosting demand for chicken breasts, lentils and cottage cheese

High-protein foods such as chicken breasts and cottage cheese used to be seen as a rather dull option favoured by gym junkies or fad dieters.

Now, however, supermarkets have reported soaring demand for such items as protein becomes a buzzword among health-conscious middle-class shoppers and Generation Z.

5 Nearly half of adults in the UK have increased their protein intake in the past year, according to a national poll of 2,200 people, rising to two thirds of those aged 16 to 34.

The online grocer Ocado, which sells M&S products, said that searches on their website for high-protein food have doubled since 2023.

10 Demand for cottage cheese, a low-fat and high-protein product made from curdled milk, has increased by 97 per cent. The food was a staple of popular diets in the Nineties, but has now been revived on TikTok by social media influencers, to become a Gen Z staple.

Amid rising awareness about the health harms of ultraprocessed foods, consumers are favouring natural protein sources, such as dairy and lean meat — and turning away from the highly processed protein bars or protein shakes, which were in fashion a decade ago.

15 Data from Ocado shows demand for Greek yoghurt is up by 56 per cent, while searches for egg whites, another naturally protein-rich option, have grown by 27 per cent.

Searches for chicken breast are up by 43 per cent, steak by 39 per cent and tuna by 35 per cent.

Vegetarians and vegans are also getting in on the act — with sales of plant-based protein soaring. There has been a 27 per cent rise in searches for chickpeas and 18 per cent for lentils.

20 Nicola Waller, buying director at Ocado Retail, said: “Protein was once seen as the reserve of bodybuilders, but today, it’s a staple for anyone looking to eat well and feel their best. Consumers are becoming more conscious of where their protein comes from, favouring natural, whole-food options over ultra-processed alternatives.”

Protein is vital for the growth and repair of muscle and tissues, and also helps to maintain a healthy immune system.

25 A nationally representative survey of 2,205 UK adults, conducted by Savanta, shows attitudes to protein have shifted in the past year, with people regarding it as vital to staying healthy, rather than just a tool for building muscle. Half of those surveyed said they eat more protein to increase their energy levels and to stay fuller for longer. Four in ten said a high protein intake helps them manage their weight.

30 The surge in popularity for naturally high-protein foods has been driven by social media trends. Almost 50 per cent of Gen Z look to Instagram and TikTok for protein inspiration, compared with 33 per cent of millennials and 5 per cent of boomers.

Popular online influencers, such as the nutritionist Emily English, share high-protein recipes and emphasise the importance of including natural sources of protein in the diet.

35 A landmark survey by The Times found that Gen Z are the most health conscious generation yet, with more than one third going to the gym several times a month.

40 UK nutritional guidelines say adults should have a minimum of 0.75g of protein per kilogram of weight each day — but this increases the more people exercise. An 85kg man (the average), should have at least 64g a day, while a 72kg woman should have 54g of protein a day. It is relatively easy to get this protein intake from a normal, healthy diet — one chicken breast contains about 40g, while an egg contains 7g, a can of chickpeas contains 20g and a tin of tuna has 14g.

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