where's the beef?

if you're like most Americans, meat is your main source of protein. Yet as evidenced by the growing number of professional athletes going vegan and excelling — think Olympic gold-medalist skater Maegan Duhamel and tennis star Venus Williams — you don’t need meat to compete. Of course, your body needs protein, but if not from meat, then what? Enter meat substitutes, plant-based protein sources that are now so mainstream that even non-vegans are using them.

Meat-Free for Life
People choose to give up meat for different reasons, including the welfare of the earth and animals, but perhaps the biggest reason is their health. “Research has shown that a whole-food, plant-based diet is the gold standard for preventing or treating things like heart disease, cancer and diabetes, diseases that nobody — even the woman who runs marathons — is immune to,” says Susan Levin, MS, RD, CSSD, director of nutrition education for the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine in Washington, D.C.

“Meat substitutes fit the bill beautifully for healthy eaters who want to consume more fiber and less saturated fat and cholesterol,” adds Kristine Duncan, MS, RDN, CDE, an instructor at Skagit Valley College in Mount Vernon, Washington. Plant foods are naturally cholesterol-free and generally lower in saturated fat as compared to their carnivorous counterparts, and they contain up to 6 grams of fiber per serving — versus zero in animal products. More important, meat substitutes provide a respectable amount of protein. For instance, a 1/4 cup of tofu has about 11 grams of protein and a cup of lentils has 9 grams of protein.

Plants and Performance
Eating more plants could give you a leg up in your fitness pursuits, helping keep you at your ideal body weight while giving you more carbohydrates as fuel so you can exert energy more efficiently.

Speaking of carbs, don’t stress about the higher volume of carbohydrates found in plant-based proteins. First off, carbs are the main fuel source for your muscles and your brain, giving you the mental and physical energy to train hard. They also contain half the calories of fat, so when you swap out higher-fat foods such as meat products for plant-based foods, you’ll automatically cut calories. Choose complex carbs like sweet potatoes, brown rice and whole grains for staying power and added fiber, and avoid processed carbs like white bread and white rice, which are quickly broken down into glucose and can cause a spike in blood sugar.

Meet the “Meats”
If you haven’t yet tested the waters of a plant-based diet, it can be a little confusing at first. Here are seven solid substitutes for meat that offer plenty of protein, carbs and fat to keep your body in peak condition.

Chickpeas and Lentils

You can make almost anything out of plants, including popular foods like chicken strips, meatballs and deli meats. These items are designed to replicate their meat counterparts, and few people who want to experiment with a meatless diet, they are a good starting point — in limited quantities. “Because they’re designed to taste like meat, they’re often loaded with high amounts of sodium and fat,” Levin says. Read ingredient lists carefully, and choose an option with low sodium and fat and with the most real, pronounceable ingredients.

Jackfruit

This funky-looking fruit is available fresh, canned or frozen, and it is comparable in texture to shredded meat, like pulled pork. Nutritionwise, jackfruit is loaded with antioxidants and contains more protein than other fruits: Compared gram for gram with apples, jackfruit has six times the protein, Levin says.
Use chickpeas and lentils as a hearty, high-pro, fiber-rich substitute for meat.
Add mushrooms to your diet to boost immunity and make meals more satisfying.
Mushrooms
3 ounces (5 medium raw) white button: calories 19, protein 3 g, fat 0 g, carbs 3 g
"The main benefit of mushrooms is selenium, a powerful antioxidant not commonly found in fruits and vegetables," Levin says, adding that mushrooms also may boost immunity and reduce inflammation. Use mushrooms as a substitute for meat in things like chili, Bolognese sauce, burgers and meatballs. And according to research, they also may be more satiating: A study published in the journal Appetite found that after folks ate mushrooms, they felt fuller and less hungry versus those who ate meat.

Tempeh
4 ounces: calories 240, protein 20 g, fat 11 g, carbs 18 g
Made from soybeans and grains, tempeh is high in fiber and protein and is a good source of calcium and iron. It's also considered a fermented food and may help improve digestive health, Duncan says. Because of its hard texture, tempeh is best used to replace bacon or corned beef on a BLT or Reuben, crumbled into stews or chili in place of ground beef or turkey, or cubed and cooked into stir-fry recipes.

Seitan
3 ounces: calories 90, protein 15 g, fat 0.5 g, carbs 8 g
Pronounced say-tan, this product comes from wheat, which is why it’s not advised for people with celiac disease and gluten intolerance. Those not adversely affected by gluten can use seitan wherever you would use meat. It's high in protein, has minimal fat and is more similar to meat than other substitutes.

Tofu
4 ounces: calories 100, protein 10 g, fat 4 g, carbs 3 g
Tofu gets a bad rap, mainly because people mistakenly associate it with an increased risk of breast cancer. "The American Cancer Society says that moderate consumption of soy foods appears to be safe to breast cancer survivors and the general population, and may even lower risk," Duncan says. Tofu also contains protein and calcium and comes in different firmness (silken, soft, firm and extra firm), and it easily picks up flavor from seasonings. Crumble tofu into a scramble in place of eggs or marinate it and bake it in strips or cubes. Tip: Freeze and thaw tofu before cooking it to improve the meatiness and reduce the squish factor.

Five Meatless Products We Love

Beyond Meat Beyond Burger Patties
With 20 grams of pea protein, 5 grams of carbs and 3 grams of fiber per 4-ounce serving, this meatless patty mimics the texture of a beef burger and even contains beet juice to make it red.
Target and other major grocery retailers, $6 for two 4-ounce patties

Field Roast Vegan Smoked Apple Sage Sausage
Made from a combination of fruit, veggies, grains and spices, these faux sausages contain 25 grams of protein each, and they are great alongside eggs or as a sub for hot dogs on the grill.
amazon.com, $4.79

Biena Dark Chocolate Roasted Chickpeas
Need your chocolate fix? Then grab a bag of these crunchy chickpea treats, which contain 4 grams of protein and 4 grams of fiber per serving (about 35 chickpeas).
thrivemarket.com, $3.69

Upton's Naturals Chili Lime Carnitas Jackfruit
Marinated in a mixture of vinegar, chili, lime and spices, this low-cal, high-fiber meat sub is perfect when shredded in tacos, on nachos or in sandwiches.
thrivemarket.com, $4.69

Sweet Earth Foods Protein Lovers Breakfast Burrito
For an easy high-pro breakfast to go, grab this burrito, which is packed with eggs, avocado, meatless Tuscan grounds, Benevolent Bacon and cheese.
(Note: This is not a vegan food).
sweetearthfoods.com, $4