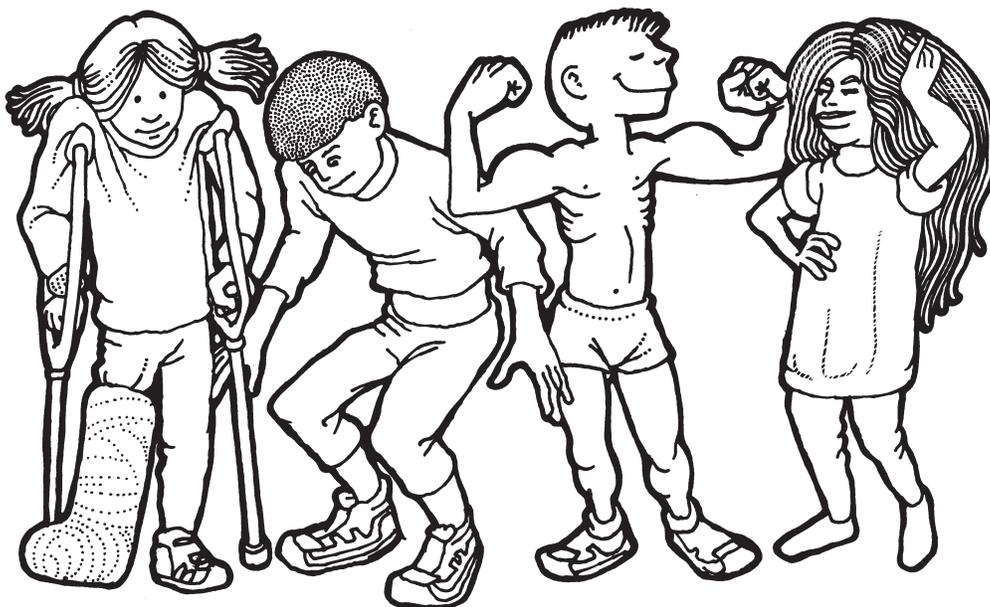


## Reading Selection

## Proteins: The Building Blocks of Life



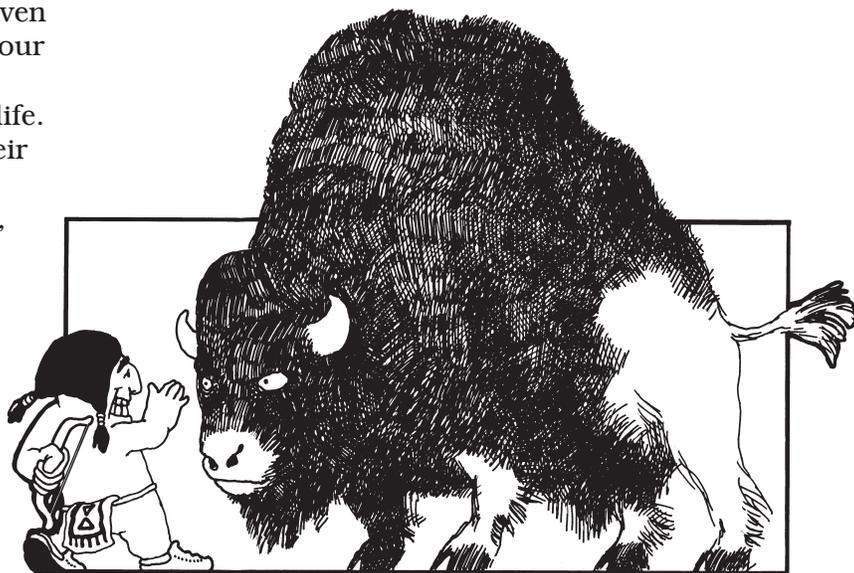
Proteins are your body's building blocks, the stuff that helps your body grow and repair itself. Most of the material in your skin, hair, muscles, and organs (such as your heart and kidneys) is made up of proteins. For months before you were even born, proteins were used for building your body. They will continue to build and repair your tissues for the rest of your life.

In this day and age, Americans get their protein from a variety of sources, including eggs, milk, cheese, meat, fish, cereal grains, and legumes. There has always been plenty of protein in this country, but actually getting it to the dinner table hasn't always been easy.

### Buffalo for Dinner

In the old days, Native Americans and pioneers couldn't go to the supermarket to buy beef, eggs, or milk. They had to hunt for protein or

trade with somebody else. Instead of eating a lot of beef, Native Americans ate wild animals like deer, turkey, rabbit, and buffalo.



Pioneers ate these things too. But when they settled down and built their own homesteads, they began to raise chickens and pigs. Pioneers also milked cows every day and got some protein from milk and the cheese they made from it. But before refrigerators, it was hard to keep milk products fresh for more than a day or two.

In the second half of the 19th century, beef cattle became a major industry in the West. (Where do you think the term “cowboy” came from?) America became one of the biggest meat-eating nations in the world. By the late 1960s, 30% of the American diet was meat, while in most other countries, people were eating less meat than that, getting more of their protein from fish or certain vegetables.

Even today, most Americans eat more protein than they need. And much of that comes from meat. For example, think about a single hamburger. That’s about three or four ounces of meat, and it’s enough protein to satisfy daily growth needs for most of us. But we can see that many Americans eat far more meat than that.

This could be a problem, because some research findings show that eating too much red meat (and the fat it often contains) may not be healthy. So, instead, more people are trying to eat more fish and poultry, which contain protein but often less fat. Some Americans are vegetarians, and, like many other people around the world, have stopped eating all meats. To stay healthy, vegetarians must plan their diets carefully and eat a wide variety of foods that contain protein.

### Anyone for Tofu?

That’s really not so hard, either. For one thing, legumes—including beans, peas, and peanuts—are a great source of protein. Because they’re so inexpensive, beans have been called “the poor man’s meat.” But there’s nothing poor about the amount of proteins legumes pack. A bowl of thick minestrone soup or a peanut butter sandwich can provide as much protein as a hamburger, omelet, or piece of chicken.

The soybean is especially useful. Soybeans produce more protein per acre than any other plant or animal. They’re easy to grow and can be made to taste like other foods. You may already have eaten soy mixed in hamburger or cereal and not even known it!

And a soy product called tofu is becoming more popular (you can probably find it in your local supermarket). Tofu is the “chameleon” of foods. It can be used in salads, casseroles, quiches, burgers, and stews, and it can even be made into a food that tastes like ice cream.

As you can see, the amounts and types of protein we eat have changed over time. But the human need for protein hasn’t changed a bit. And while we don’t need a lot of protein to stay healthy, we do need some. So for now, our best bet may be to eat a variety of protein foods from both plants and animals.

