NO MATTER HOW MUCH PROTEIN YOU EAT, SUPPLEMENTING WITH AMINO ACIDS COULD HELP YOUR BODY WORK BETTER

By Jordana Brown

It's a refrain most gym-goers know: Amino acids are the building blocks of protein. But what the average Joe might not get is that amino acids are more like the building blocks of the body, critically important to most of its processes. Though they often combine to do various things, each individual amino (there are 20 used by the human body) has a handful of “specialties,” or functions that it promotes best. That's why it can be so beneficial to supplement with them. Here are four aminos you may want to consider taking.

**Arginine**
If you've heard a lot about arginine, that's because it's big with people who are looking to get, well, big. Arginine is muscle food because its main job is forming nitric oxide (NO). Gym-goers like that because NO increases blood flow — and that means more nutrients are delivered to muscles, which makes them grow. But arginine, not surprisingly, also has positive effects on the cardiovascular system as a whole. Studies show that NO maintains the integrity of blood vessels, specifically by preventing the buildup and adhesion of the fatty plaques that can cause heart disease. And we might as well mention that better blood flow can be a big boon for sexual health, too. An Israeli study published in the February 1999 issue of BJU International involving men with erectile dysfunction found that 31 percent saw improvement in their condition while taking arginine supplements.

**Dose:** Arginine alpha-ketoglutarate and arginine alpha-ketoisocaproate are thought to be better absorbed than the simplest form, L-arginine, but dosage is the same for all three: 1–3g two or three times a day on an empty stomach.

**BCAA**
We admit it, this is a bit of a cheat. There are three branched-chain amino acids (BCAAs) — so called because of their unique molecular layout: leucine, isoleucine and valine. But most supplements include all three because they need to be taken together for full effect. Because BCAAs are readily converted to glucose, their main effect is to increase the amount of energy you have during exercise. This provides an alternative fuel source to glycogen, which is what the body normally uses to operate. In fact, these aminos are so important to energy that if your BCAA stores are low and you’re engaged in endurance exercise, your...
body will actively break down muscle to get more. There's also evidence that BCAAs are involved in repairing muscle after exercise and in boosting the function of the immune system.

dose: Take 3–5g twice daily on an empty stomach.

**glutamine**
Another key amino in energy production, glutamine not only supplies muscles with compounds that can be used as fuel, it also increases the amount of glycogen that muscle cells can hold and helps clear away the fatigue-boosting chemicals produced by exercise. Plus, glutamine is the primary amino acid used as energy by the cells of the intestinal tract, so it's key to digestive health.

dose: Since glutamine can upset your stomach, start small and work your way up to 1–3g two to four times per day on an empty stomach.

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phenylalanine
Feeling down? This is the amino for you. Phenylalanine is a precursor to the potent brain chemicals norepinephrine and dopamine, both of which are linked to mood. While studies involving other amino acids are just now occurring, phenylalanine's effects on mood were established as far back as 1975, when a study showed improvement in 17 out of 23 depressed subjects for whom antidepressants hadn't worked. The best part? That mood boost came after anywhere between one and 13 days of supplementing with phenylalanine.

dose: Take 500–1,500mg in the morning on an empty stomach.

The refrain may be that aminos are the building blocks of protein, but supplementing with any of these powerful examples might just have you singing a different tune.

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