

How Supermarkets Became Protein-Maxxed

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In our age of protein, there are now protein candies and cookies:

There's protein coffee and protein water:

And protein chips and crackers:

New food start-ups have proliferated:

While legacy brands have revamped their most famous offerings:

We are living in an era of protein hype. The macronutrient has become a focus of trendy weight-loss advice. It's an obsession of weight lifters and longevity biohackers. Doctors have been advising higher protein consumption for patients taking GLP-1 weight loss drugs. And the government's new [dietary guidelines](#), released last year, boosted the levels of recommended protein by more than 50 percent. The guidelines tell Americans to "prioritize protein foods at every meal."

The food industry, naturally, has caught on to this nutritional trend. Yogurt and cheese are now being positioned as high-protein foods, which they always have been. Prepackaged salami snacks are called "protein packs."

But protein is also [finding its way](#) into foods that haven't traditionally contained much of it. You can find protein tortilla chips, granolas, baby food, pudding — even ranch dressing.

Over one week, reporters and editors at The Upshot were asked to snap photos of protein marketing in foods they came across in their daily lives. The folder of images grew rapidly. The protein foods are in bodegas, gas stations, grocery stores, warehouse clubs, coffee shops and chain restaurants.

The trend has puzzled many nutritionists, including experts involved in developing the new protein-enhanced nutritional guidelines.

"A snack food is an indulgent food, and people need to understand it that way," said Donald Layman, an emeritus professor at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign who helped inform the protein chapter for the guidelines. He said protein-packed chips and cupcakes are "a bad choice." A doughnut with 10 grams of protein is still a doughnut.

The guidelines advise Americans to eat less processed food and to focus on foods that are naturally high in protein, including dairy, meat, nuts and beans. Protein added to processed snack foods is not the same thing, he said.

"I refer to it as fairy dust," Professor Layman said. "Fairy dusting over products that don't need to have protein in them is useless."

(We neglected to ask him about his views on several protein-infused vodkas, including [one](#) that claims it is "crafted for the wellness-minded and fitness-forward.")

[Protein bars](#), powders and shakes have been around for a while; they long ago broke out from bodybuilding to the mainstream. They now occupy an expanding share of real estate in grocery stores and gas station convenience stores — in many cases, entire aisles.

But there are now also protein versions of everything else, with a range of claims. Sources of protein and *good* sources of protein. High PROTEIN, PROTEIN-packed, and sometimes just “PRO.” It is almost always in all caps, and often in the product’s name.

And there are snack categories that appear to exist primarily in the protein universe, like sticks and balls.

Even white-label supermarket brands now offer protein foods.

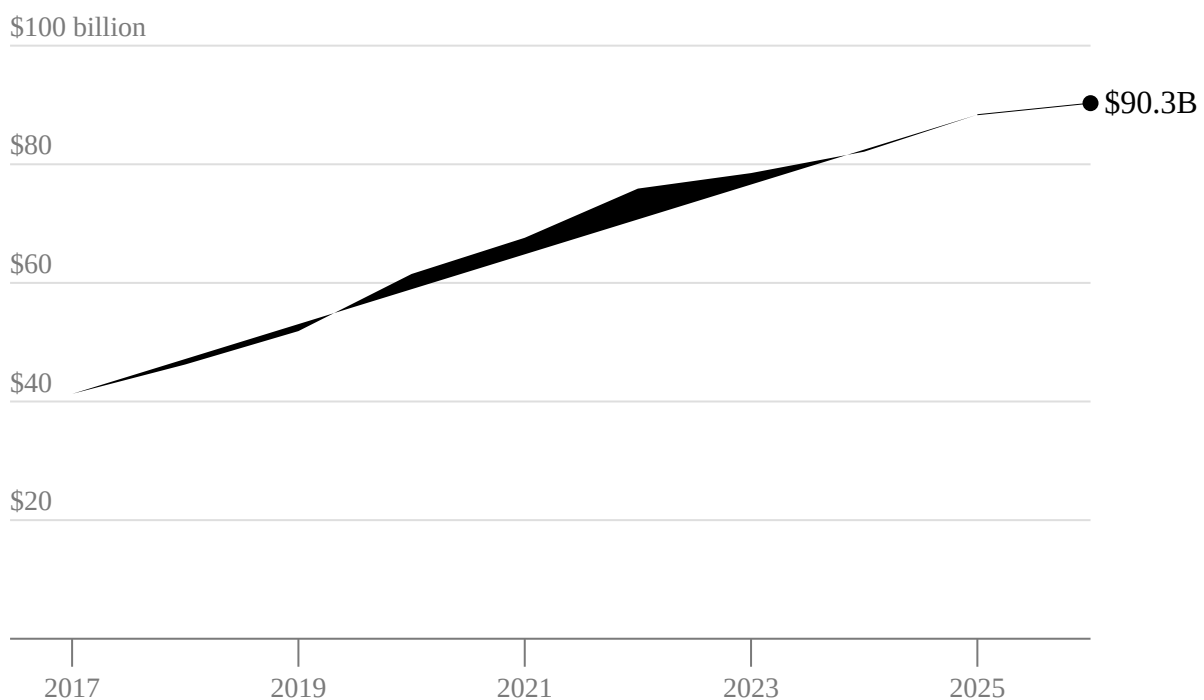
“If you’re not evolving and the consumer is, you’re dead in the water,” said Bonnie Herzog, an equity analyst at Goldman Sachs, who tracks the food and beverage industry. Ms. Herzog, a vegan, said her social media feed was filled with advice to eat more protein and tips on how to do it.

NIQ, which collects detailed data on retail food sales, counts 37,232 products in stores carrying front-of-package protein claims.

It has measured around \$90 billion in consumer spending on these products over the last year, including more than \$2 billion on protein pizzas and \$35 million on protein toaster pastries. (Yes, [Protein Pop-Tarts](#) exist.)

Americans are spending more on food that advertises protein

Annual U.S. retail sales of products with a protein claim on the package.



The last point covers the 52 weeks ending Sept. 5, 2026. Source: NIQ

“You’ve got the claims sneaking into categories that don’t make a lot of sense,” said Chris Costagli, a vice president at NIQ, who monitors the food and beverage industries. “All of a sudden, you’ve got people that are buying the product just because they see the word.”

Whey, the milk-based protein that is the key ingredient in most protein powders, bars and even ice creams, was once considered a waste product of cheese production. It is now in such demand that prices have

doubled in the last five years, according to [Ever.Ag](#), an agricultural risk management firm that closely tracks prices in the dairy industry.

“There were a lot of questions over the last few months of are we at the jump-the-shark moment with some of these new products,” said Kathleen Wolfley, the company’s vice president for insights.

But, she said, “we continue to see further innovation in this marketplace.” She also noted that the protein bonanza had been [great news for struggling cheesemakers](#).

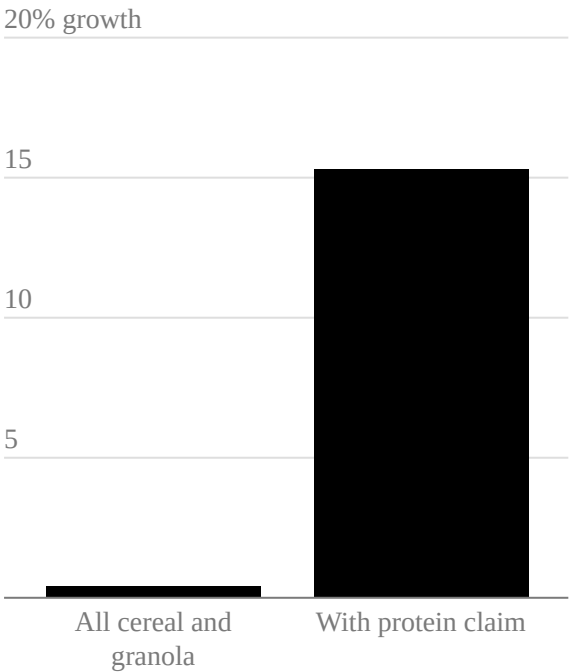
Nearly 90 percent of Americans already get enough protein, according to a [recent analysis](#) from the U.S. Department of Agriculture. (If you’re curious how much you should be getting, [here’s](#) a calculator.) But consumers still seem hungry for more.

Sales of protein-packed breakfast cereals and granola have increased by 15 percent over the last year, according to NIQ. They are often paired with ultrafiltered high-protein milks. (It is those filtered milks that are used to make the protein foams at your local coffee shop.)

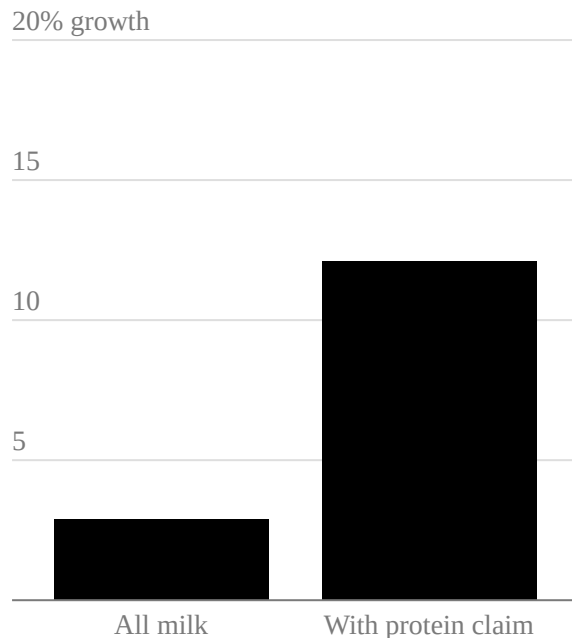
Protein promotion is driving sales

Change in U.S. retail sales over the past year.

Cereal and granola



Milk



The data covers the 52 weeks ending Aug. 29, 2026. Source: NIQ

Tortilla chips with protein are also selling at a steady clip, driving PepsiCo's new launch of Protein Doritos, located on a supermarket endcap near you:

Do protein Doritos taste good? Matt Rosenman, a graphic designer who makes [social media](#) content examining food marketing and health, said he had tried nearly all the protein snacks, including tortilla chips that were close to inedible. His verdict on protein Doritos was more positive: "Slightly worse version of Doritos, but they are pretty close."

In videos, Mr. Rosenman shows some of the common tricks food companies use to make junk foods look like responsible choices. Neutral colors and pictures of farms and mountains signify healthy products. Unregulated words like "plant-based" and "natural" help give foods a virtuous halo. But as the protein arms race has intensified, these subtle techniques have faded. Font size has come to dominate protein claims.

With ubiquitous giant bubbles, companies emphasize protein content, sometimes even when products don't offer much of it. The Food and Drug Administration, which regulates health claims on foods, has relatively lax rules about how brands use the word "protein" on the front of their packages. While there are rules about claiming a product has "high protein" or is a "good source," vaguer claims in product names and giant bubbles are almost always unregulated.

"It works, and it works for me," Mr. Rosenman said. "I saw the giant word 'protein' and it stopped me in my tracks."

Doritos itself is a useful case study. The brightly packaged chips have been around since the 1960s, with reformulations for nearly every major diet trend. The original Doritos emphasized that they were tasty with dips. But nutrition claims started showing up in the 1970s, with the information they contained "no preservatives!"

Since then, there have been versions marketed as cholesterol free, less oil,

Low calorie, low carbohydrate,

"Light" and "naked of dyes."

Of course, you can protein-max by cooking your own food. There are endless [TikToks](#) and Instagram [Reels](#) about how to consume more than 150 grams of protein a day, often by sneaking chicken breasts and

cottage cheese into just about every meal. (Cottage cheese fatigue has become such an issue that there is now a subcategory of videos on how to make high-protein meals without it.)

But junk food is more fun.

Dariush Mozaffarian, a cardiologist who directs the Food Is Medicine Institute at Tufts University, compared protein chips and protein brownies to SnackWell's Cookies of yore — products that are no healthier than the highly processed foods they replaced, but sheathed in a patina of virtue.

“It's a bizarre trend, and not supported by the science,” he said.

As Doritos teaches, nutritional fads come and go. Peak protein may not last forever. (Several industry experts casually mentioned that [fiber](#) may be the next big thing.) Around 70 years ago, food scientists at what was then the Kellogg Company teamed with researchers at the Harvard School of Public Health to develop a new cereal, called Special K. Its main selling point? PROTEIN!

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