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INCREDIBLE, EDIBLE: Eight of the 20 amino acids your body requires must be supplied from food.

amino essentials

The best source for these acids is animal protein. What's a vegetarian to do?

dRAIN THE WATER FROM YOUR BODY and what's left is 75 percent amino acids. They're the building blocks of protein, enabling the growth, repair, and maintenance of tissues for muscles, bones, organs, nails, hair, skin, ligaments, and glands. In their spare time, they also serve as neurotransmitters.

Your body relies on 20 amino acids (though there are likely more). You can produce 12; the other eight—dubbed “essential”—need to come from food. The essential

amino acids include isoleucine, leucine, lysine, methionine, phenylalanine, threonine, tryptophan, and valine; children also require arginine and histidine.

The best sources of essential amino acids are meat, poultry, fish, eggs, and dairy products. Most Americans eat more than enough protein and thus get their necessary aminos. But for vegetarians and those who follow certain low-calorie diets, protein deficiencies—measurable by a blood test—can be a problem, says Cynthia Sass,

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