

Ask Leyla: What do I need to know about branched chain amino acids?

written by Leyla Muedin MS, RD, CDN | June 18, 2021



Q: I know that branched-chain amino acids (BCAAs) are good to consume after a workout, but aside from whey protein, I'm not sure which foods can provide them.

Are there any sources of BCAAs other than whey protein?

A: There is a great misconception that BCAAs are only present in whey protein. However, some of the best sources of BCAAs are eggs, poultry, fish and meat. Additionally, plant sources such as beans, lentils, brown rice, and nuts contain smaller amounts of BCAAs per serving.

Branched-chain amino acids consist of leucine, isoleucine, and valine—all essential amino acids and named for their branched molecular structure. The BCAAs are the main drivers in the synthesis and repair of skeletal muscle, making them essential post-exercise or for treating sarcopenia (diminishing muscle mass) which can occur with illness and/or advancing age.

While whey protein is an excellent source of BCAAs, individuals with a dairy allergy or sensitivity are better off avoiding it altogether, as are those following a *Paleo* or *Whole 30* program that not only eliminate dairy but grains and legumes too.

There is a one-hour window after strenuous exercise that is optimal for taking BCAAs to promote protein synthesis in muscles and to reduce exercise-induced muscle damage. While I am a proponent of using whey protein as a source of BCAAs for my athletic clients without any known dairy intolerances, as well as my sarcopenic patients who need the additional protein and calories, you can just as easily get them eating a balanced meal of good quality animal and plant proteins such as beans and nuts.

To your health!

Leyla Muedin, MS, RD, CDN