



DIETARY FIBER

What is Dietary Fiber?

Dietary fiber is a broad term that describes the part of plant foods that your body cannot digest. Two types of dietary fiber are soluble and insoluble. Most foods contain mixtures of both soluble and insoluble fibers. For good health it is important to have both kinds of fiber in your diet. A diet rich in high-fiber foods is lower in fat and higher in vitamins and minerals than a low-fiber diet. This can help lower blood pressure, aiding in the prevention of heart disease and stroke. High-fiber diets can also play an important role in weight control, because fruits and vegetables are usually low in calories.

Soluble Fiber vs. Insoluble Fiber

Soluble fiber refers to the type of fiber that dissolves in water. Soluble fiber is found in beans, peas, lentils, oats and barley. Apples, carrots and squash are also foods containing soluble fiber. Fiber from over-the counter laxatives is also considered soluble fiber.

Soluble fiber can help lower blood cholesterol levels, especially LDL-cholesterol or the “bad” cholesterol. It can also help control blood sugar levels in diabetic patients, oftentimes reducing the need for insulin or medication.

Insoluble fiber, which does not dissolve in water, is found in foods like wheat bran, whole grains, and all fruits and vegetables. It is often referred to as “roughage” or “bulk” because it keeps the digestive system functioning normally. This helps prevent constipation, hemorrhoids, and other digestive problems.

Dietary Fiber and Cancer Prevention

High-fiber diets have also been shown to prevent certain diseases, including colon and rectal cancer. It helps form a bulkier, heavier stool. Slow movement of food through the digestive tract allows more time for potentially harmful substances to come in contact with the intestinal walls. Bulkier stools move waste faster, thus helping to dilute the concentration of these substances.

Dietary Fiber and Cancer Prevention

The recommended daily allowance of dietary fiber for adults is 20 to 35 grams per day. To meet this fiber goal, eat 3 to 5 servings of vegetables, 2 to 4 servings of fruit and 6 or more servings of whole grain breads, cereals, pastas or legumes each day. Fiber needs to be added gradually to your diet, or it may cause gas,

bloating or even diarrhea. Also, make sure to drink plenty of liquids when consuming a high-fiber diet.

It's possible to get too much of a good thing, however. Eating 50 or more grams of fiber each day may decrease the amount of minerals your body absorbs, especially zinc, iron, magnesium and calcium. Too much fiber can also increase the speed at which food moves through the digestive tract, allowing too little time for some vitamins and minerals to be absorbed.

Children, on the other hand, need less fiber depending on their age. Too much fiber in a young child's diet may fill them up too quickly, making it hard for them to eat enough calories for proper growth.

Adding Fiber to Your Diet

Here are some tips for increasing your fiber intake:

- Eat a variety of high-fiber foods.
- Choose at least 3 servings of whole grain per day.
- Choose whole grain breads, cereals including oatmeal, pasta, crackers and flour.
- Snack on fruits, vegetables, and high-fiber cereals and grains.
- Have legumes like dried beans or peas two to three times per week.
- Consume fresh fruits rather than fruit juices.
- Scrub vegetables and fruit instead of peeling the skin.
- Substitute high fiber ingredients in recipes, such as adding vegetables to casseroles.

Food Label Terminology

Nutrition labels list a Daily Reference Value (DRV) for nutrients, including fiber. The DRV for fiber is 25 grams per day based on a 2,000 calorie diet for women, or 30 grams per day based on a 2,500 calorie diet for men.

Also, be aware that being brown doesn't mean bread is whole wheat. By law, any bread labeled “whole wheat” must be made of 100% whole wheat flour. “Wheat bread” however, may contain some white refined flour as well as wheat flour depending on the product. With a little label reading, you can get a general idea of the amount of each type.

Other helpful food label terminology is listed below:

Food Label Terminology	
On the Label	What it means
High fiber	5 grams or more per serving
Good Source	2.5 grams but less than 5 grams per serving
More or added fiber	At least 2.5 grams or more per serving than identical food not containing fiber

References

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