

FANTASTIC FIBER

Most of us hear the word fiber and automatically think of bland, chalky and all-around unappetizing foods. Fortunately, with the advancements in food science and technology, this is no longer the case. Our generation has been freed from health foods that taste like cardboard and have the visual appeal of hamster food!

What is fiber?

Fiber is a string of sugar molecules that are bonded together in such a way that they cannot be digested. So why bother eating something you can't digest? Well, that is actually the point. Fiber makes its way through the digestive tract and cleans it out. And since fiber can't be digested, it is calorie free. Some bacteria in your colon is able to break fiber down into smaller useable units that may have other health benefits.

There are two types of fiber. For optimal benefits, you should get enough of both in your diet.

Soluble fiber dissolves in water and has been linked with lowering levels of "bad" low-density lipoprotein (LDL) cholesterol.

Insoluble fiber cleans out your gut and is associated with a reduced risk of cardiovascular disease.

Benefits

A diet high in fiber has many health benefits. Besides being important for digestive health, fiber is most famous for reducing cholesterol and preventing diseases related to high cholesterol. Not a bad deal for a calorie-free nutrient. There are also indications that a high-fiber diet improves glucose tolerance.

Fiber is also beneficial for weight loss. The large, bulky molecule structure increases your sense of being full without adding any calories. It also slows the emptying of your stomach, further prolonging that sense of satisfaction so that you won't eat as frequently.

Recommendations

The current daily recommendations for fiber are as follows:

- Ages 9–13: 31 grams for boys and 26 grams for girls



- Boys and men ages 14–50: 38 grams
- Girls ages 14–18: 26 grams
- Women ages 19–50: 25 grams
- Ages 50 and older: 30 grams for men and 21 grams for women

Incorporating Fiber-rich Foods

When increasing your fiber intake, it is important to start slowly. Surprising your digestive tract with more fiber than it's used to can lead to constipation, nausea and other gastrointestinal discomfort. So start increasing your fiber intake by a few grams per day until you work up to the recommended levels. Fiber also absorbs water, so when you increase your fiber intake, it is important to increase your water intake as well.

There are many fiber-fortified cereals, crackers, yogurts and other products from which to choose. Foods naturally rich in fiber include whole grains, nuts, fruits and vegetables. Here are some simple things you can do to incorporate more fiber into your diet.

Start your day with a bowl of oatmeal, which is one of the best sources of soluble fiber. Add dried fruit and nuts for some texture and additional fiber.

Switch from refined grain products to whole-grain products. Make sure your groceries say 100% whole wheat and have at least 3 grams of fiber per serving. Many whole-wheat pastas and breads are being engineered to resemble the taste and texture of their white counterparts, which may make your transition easier.

- Mix half brown rice with half white rice to ease the transition from white rice to brown rice.
- Snack on fruits and vegetables.
- Trail mixes that have nuts and dried fruit are packed with fiber.

Additional Resources

American Heart Association—Fiber:
<http://www.americanheart.org/presenter.jhtml?identifier=4574>

Institute of Medicine—Dietary Reference Intakes: <http://www.iom.edu/Object.File/Master/21/372/0.pdf>

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