

# What Do You Know About Fiber?<sup>1</sup>

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Fiber, often called “roughage” or “bulk,” is important for good health! It is well known that certain types of fiber help lower blood cholesterol and some fibers help prevent constipation.

## What is Fiber?



Fiber is the general name for several kinds of substances found only in plants. For example, celery strings and strawberry seeds are made up of fiber. It is a component of foods that our bodies cannot digest. There are two types of fiber: insoluble, which does not dissolve in water; and soluble, which can dissolve in water. These two types of fiber have different positive effects on our health. Soluble fiber helps lower blood cholesterol and may reduce the risk of heart disease. Insoluble fiber promotes a healthy gastrointestinal tract.

## Where Can We Find Fiber?

Soluble and insoluble fibers are found in combination in many foods. Other foods contain only one type of fiber. Eat these fiber-rich sources of foods often:

- **whole grains:** whole grain breakfast cereal, whole wheat breads, oats, barley, brown rice and whole corn cereals; including grits.
- **legumes:** all types of beans including kidney, navy, black and pinto beans, whole peas, split peas, and lentils.

- **fruits and vegetables:** apples, raisins, prunes, berries, cabbage, broccoli, carrots and peas. Vegetables and fruits with edible skins and seeds are full of fiber.
- **nuts and seeds:** pecans, almonds, walnuts, peanuts, and sunflower seeds. Remember, nuts are also high in fat and calories so stick to a ¼ cup serving.

**For good health, it's important to eat a variety of these foods.**

## Why Do We Need Fiber?

A diet high in a variety of fibers promotes good health. A fiber-rich diet helps:

- Maintain regular bowel movements; prevent constipation, hemorrhoids, and diverticulosis, an intestinal disease.
- Improve blood cholesterol levels, particularly reducing low-density lipoprotein (LDL); lowering LDL-cholesterol helps prevent heart disease.



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- Maintain a healthy weight. Eating high-fiber foods may make you feel full longer. Also, a high-fiber diet is often lower in calories.

In addition, a diet high in fiber may help persons with diabetes better manage their blood glucose levels.

## How Much Fiber Do We Need?

The amount of daily fiber we need depends on how many calories we eat. Unfortunately many Americans only eat about half the recommended amount. Here are some general guidelines.

Life Stage		Grams of fiber daily
	Age Years	
Boys	1–3	19
	4–8	25
	9–13	31
	14–18	38
Girls	1–3	19
	4–8	25
	9–18	26
Men	19–50	38
	51+	30
Women	19–50	25
	51+	21
	Pregnant	28
	Breastfeeding	29

## How Can I Get Enough Fiber?

Tips to add fiber to your diet:

- ✓ Read the **Nutrition Facts** label on food products.

- ✓ Choose foods with between 2.5 to 4.9 grams of fiber per serving: this amount indicates the food is a “good source of fiber.” Or choose a product with 5 or more grams of fiber per serving, which indicates it is “high in,” “rich in” or an “excellent source of” fiber.
- ✓ Look for products that list whole grains first on the ingredients list. For example; brown rice, whole oats, or whole wheat. Products labeled with words such as “multi-grain,” “100% wheat” or “bran” are frequently not made with whole grain, so be wary!
- ✓ Start your day with whole grain cereal, topped with  $\frac{1}{4}$  cup dried fruit, or try pancakes topped with fresh fruit.
- ✓ Add beans and peas to salads, soups or stews.
- ✓ Add  $\frac{1}{4}$  cup dried fruits and/or  $\frac{1}{4}$  cup nuts to salads.
- ✓ Try snacking on vegetables and hummus or bean dip.
- ✓ Choose whole fruits over juices whenever possible.
- ✓ Snack on air popped unsalted popcorn.



When increasing fiber intake, be sure to:

- Start slowly to prevent gas and bloating, then gradually add high-fiber foods.
- Drink plenty of fluids daily.
- Eat a variety of foods to get both types of fiber.
- Include a high fiber food at breakfast, lunch, dinner and snacking time.

**Fact: whole grains contain the entire grain kernel- the bran, endosperm, and germ.**

## What about Fiber Supplements?

It's best to get fiber from food rather than supplements. Not only are foods enjoyable to eat, they are also packed with other nutrients important for good health. Fiber supplements such as powders, wafers or tablets may be used if you have frequent intestinal problems, but they can affect how some medicines work. Talk to your health care provider before using a fiber supplement.

## References

American Dietetic Association

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