

Eat More Fruit, Fiber

Tallahassee Democrat

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As we welcome 2008, many people set goals to make healthy lifestyle changes. If you have set such a goal, is increasing your dietary fiber on the list? Most Americans do not eat enough fiber, only about 10 to 15 grams per day, so why is it so important?

Once referred to as “roughage” or “bulk,” dietary fiber is the parts of plants that we cannot digest and comes only from foods that come from plants. Fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and legumes all contain fiber. While fiber is not a nutrient, it does perform important “housekeeping” functions in our bodies.

Fiber is found in two forms, insoluble and soluble, in foods. Most foods high in dietary fiber contain both types of fiber, but they have them in different amounts. Each type performs a specific job. Insoluble fiber, which does not dissolve in water, adds bulk to the stool. This helps to prevent and treat constipation and diverticular disease, a bowel problem that can cause discomfort and sometimes severe pain. It often is treated with a high fiber diet, although in severe cases, it may be treated with a low fiber diet. Sources of insoluble fiber include whole grain breads, cereals, pastas, fruit with edible peel or seeds, and vegetables.

Soluble fiber dissolves partially in water. It helps lower blood cholesterol when eaten as part of a low fat diet by removing excess cholesterol from our bodies. This helps prevent heart disease in some people. Soluble fiber is found in oat bran, oatmeal, apples, oranges, grapefruit, cabbage, and legumes (dry beans, lentils, or peas).

What are Whole Grains?

Whole grains contain the three parts of the wheat grain: the endosperm, the bran, and the germ. Refined flour includes only the endosperm. The bran and the germ contain most of the fiber in the wheat grain and they are stripped away during processing of refined flour, leaving only the endosperm. As a result, refined flour is much lower in fiber than whole wheat flour.

Whole grains come in a variety of products. Here are a few to try: whole wheat, popcorn, cracked wheat, brown rice, bulgur, whole rye, whole cornmeal, oatmeal, barley, and quinoa.

Are All Wheat Breads the Same?

Not all wheat breads are *whole* wheat. Some bread labeled “wheat” bread does contain wheat flour but the flour is refined so the fiber benefits are not the same as in “whole” wheat bread. When shopping for bread, check the ingredient list on the wrapper. “*Whole* wheat flour” should be one of the first ingredients in the list; if “whole wheat” is not listed, choose another brand.

How Much Fiber Do I Need?

The amount recommended to help protect against heart disease is 14 grams of dietary fiber per 1,000 calories eaten. For a 2,000-calorie per day diet, 28 grams of fiber is recommended. For diets below 2,000 calories, 20 grams is the lowest recommended fiber intake. Older people need fewer calories, so their fiber needs are less. However, they should get enough fiber (and fluids) to stay “regular.”

To avoid gas pains and diarrhea, increase fiber in your diet *slowly*. Here is an easy plan: Add 1/2 cup or one medium piece fresh fruit and either one slice whole wheat bread, 3/4 cup of whole grain ready-to-eat cereal, or 1/2 cup cooked cereal or pasta to your daily diet. These are referred to as “one-ounce equivalents” for the Grain Group in MyPyramid (www.mypyramid.gov). After a few days, add 1/2 cup of a fresh or frozen vegetable **and** another whole grain product to your daily diet. Keep adding vegetables, fruits, and whole grains until **every day** you eat approximately two cups of fruits, two and a half cups of vegetables, and three one-ounce equivalents of whole grain breads, cereals, or pasta. (The actual amount depends on your total calorie needs.) Legumes also are a good source of dietary fiber. Lentils and dried beans and peas are legumes. Enjoy them at least two to three times a week as a main dish.

Remember to Drink Water!

Be sure to drink at least six to eight glasses of fluid, especially water, each day. This will decrease side effects from the increased fiber in your diet. Get into the habit of drinking a tall glass of water first thing in the morning. Enjoy water with your meals.

Read the Label

Check the Nutrition Facts panel on food packages to see how much fiber the food contains per serving. The fiber content is required to be included as part of the Nutrition Facts on most foods. A “good source of fiber” claim on the package means that the food has three to four grams of fiber per serving. A “high fiber” food claim means it has five or more grams per serving. Keep in mind that even if a food provides only two or three grams of fiber in a serving, it contributes to your total fiber intake for the day.

Increasing Fiber in Recipes

Try these easy ways to add fiber to your diet:

- Use brown rice instead of white rice.
- Substitute up to one-half the flour called for in a recipe with whole wheat flour. Also, use rye flour, oatmeal, oat bran, or wheat to replace some of the white flour in breads, muffins, and quick bread recipes.
- Eat vegetables and fruits with the peels, when possible.
- Eat a whole orange, instead of drinking orange juice, for breakfast more often.
- Have fresh fruit for dessert instead of sweets.
- Grate fresh carrot into coleslaw and other salads (this also adds vitamin A).
- Add sliced banana, peach, or other fruit to your cereal.
- Keep prepared carrot and celery sticks, cucumber rounds, and other fresh vegetables at work for a quick, high fiber (and low fat) snack.
- Keep whole wheat crackers at work for an easy, high fiber snack.

For more information on adding fiber to your diet, please contact your local county Extension Office.

Sources: *Nutrition for Health and Fitness: Fiber in Your Diet*, L. B. Bobroff, University of Florida/IFAS Extension, 2002.

Fiber, Nutrition Source, Harvard School of Public Health,
<http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/nutritionsource/fiber.html>