

Healthy Eating: How to Get More Fiber in Your Diet



Fiber is the part of fruits, vegetables, and grains that your body cannot digest. Since you cannot digest fiber, it does not get absorbed into your body. But fiber is important for the health of your intestine.

The recommended amount of fiber you should have each day is 20 to 35 grams.

Why is a high-fiber diet good for you?

Eating a high-fiber diet may help prevent development of pouches, called diverticula, in your colon. Fiber may also help prevent those pouches from becoming infected, a painful condition called diverticulitis. If you already have pouches, more fiber in your diet should reduce symptoms such as bloating and constipation.

A high-fiber diet also will help prevent bleeding, blockage, or tears of the colon.

Fiber also helps healthy bowel movement. Fiber from foods is better for the bowel than fiber supplements, such as psyllium seed products. These products are not recommended to replace foods as a source of fiber. But psyllium may

lower cholesterol in people who are already eating a low-fat diet. Your doctor can tell you if you need a fiber supplement.

What is the difference between soluble and insoluble fibers?

Soluble fiber

"Soluble" means the fiber gets soft or turns to a gel in water. Soluble fiber helps lower your cholesterol. It also can help control blood sugar in people with diabetes. Foods high in soluble fiber include oat bran, oatmeal, beans and peas, rice bran, barley, citrus fruits, apples, and strawberries.

People who have high cholesterol may be able to lower their cholesterol by eating a diet high in soluble fiber. This may lower your chances of getting heart disease.

Insoluble fiber

Insoluble fiber does not lower blood cholesterol, but it is important in keeping your bowels healthy. It helps prevent constipation and diseases of the intestine. Foods high in insoluble fiber include whole wheat breads, whole wheat cereals, wheat bran, and vegetables.

How to get fiber in your diet

- Choose whole-grain breads and cereals that have at least 2 grams of fiber in each serving.
- Buy bread that lists whole wheat (or other whole grains), stone-ground wheat, or cracked wheat as the first ingredients.
- Eat brown rice, bulgur, or millet instead of white rice.
- Eat 6 to 11 servings of grains (breads, cereals, rice, pasta) each day. For example, a serving is 1 slice of bread, 1 cup of boxed cereal, or ½ cup of cooked rice, cooked pasta, or cooked cereal.

- Eat several servings a day of fresh fruits and vegetables. These include raspberries, apples, figs, oranges, pears, prunes, broccoli, brussels sprouts, carrots, corn, peas, and beans.
- Eat cooked dry beans and legumes.
- Check labels to find the amount of fiber in packaged foods and fiber supplements. To be high in fiber, they must have at least 2 grams of fiber in each serving.

Bran is widely known as a good source of fiber. But many bran products in the store, such as muffins and waffles, actually contain very little bran. And they are often high in fat and sugar. Check the labels for the actual fiber content.

Some doctors recommend adding bran to your diet to help boost your fiber. If you do this, start slowly with 1 teaspoon a day. Gradually increase the amount to several teaspoons a day.

Increase the amount of fiber in your diet slowly so that your stomach can adjust to the change. Adding too much fiber too quickly may cause stomach upset and gas.

Drink more water

Drink plenty of water every day to help keep your stools soft. High-fiber diets need lots of water to work properly. If your diet has enough fiber in it, your stools should become softer, larger, and easier to pass.

If you need help changing your diet, talk to your doctor. He or she may refer you to a registered dietitian, an expert in healthy eating.