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Facts about Fiber

Why is fiber an essential part of a healthy diet?

Does it seem that you are hearing more about the importance of dietary fiber than ever before? Recent scientific evidence shows that a high-fiber diet is associated with a variety of health benefits such as controlling weight, contributing to a healthy digestive tract and regular bowel habits, and reducing the risk of heart disease, diabetes, and cancer in the lower digestive tract.

What is fiber?

Fiber is a type of carbohydrate that cannot be broken down by enzymes in your digestive tract. Fiber is categorized as soluble or insoluble, each with its own unique health benefits. Soluble fiber is a gel-type substance that slows the transit of food, slows glucose absorption, increases satiety, and lowers blood cholesterol levels. It is found in foods such as oat bran, barley, legumes, and fruits. Insoluble fiber is a “woodier” substance that provides bulk and speeds the transit of food through the gastrointestinal tract, lowering the risk of diverticulosis and hemorrhoids. It is found in wheat bran, whole grains, vegetables, legumes, and fruits. You may also find fiber additives, such as psyllium, polydextrose, inulin, and maltodextrin, in a variety of dairy products, baked goods, and cereals. Although these additives increase the fiber content of the product, their long-term effects on health have not yet been determined.

How much fiber is enough?

Unfortunately, 90% of adults and children in the United States are not eating enough fiber, with the average intake being about one-half the recommended amount. The Institute of Medicine recommends 14 grams of fiber for each 1,000 calories. For simpler guidelines, children should consume fiber in the amount of their *age plus 5*; adults should consume 25-38 grams of fiber daily.

How can I know if a packaged food is high in fiber?

Many consumers assume that all “whole grain” foods contain a high amount of fiber, but these foods can vary in fiber content. For packaged foods, choose those that list whole grains as the first ingredient. Also, read the fiber information on the Nutrition Facts Panel. Select products that are **good sources** of fiber – those that contain at least 10% of the Daily Value or 2.5 grams per serving and **excellent sources** – those that contain at least 20% of the Daily Value or 5 grams of fiber per serving.

What are some easy ways to increase the fiber in my diet?

When you decide to increase your fiber intake, be sure to make small, incremental changes in your diet and increase your fluid intake. Include more whole grains, fruits, vegetables, nuts, beans, seeds, and peas in your diet. You might start the day with a small bowl of bran flakes with berries, and then enjoy a whole wheat pita stuffed with vegetables and an unpeeled apple for lunch, followed by baked fish, steamed broccoli, and brown rice for dinner. Don't forget to boost your fiber intake with healthy snacks such as popcorn or trail mix (mixed nuts & dried fruit) throughout the day.