

For many years, dietary fiber was overlooked as an important part of the diet because it contributes virtually no calories, vitamins, or minerals. But today, health care professionals encourage us to eat more fiber because of its many health benefits.

What is Fiber?

Fiber is the portion of plant foods that your body can't digest or absorb. Scientists group fiber into two major categories—soluble and insoluble—with each offering unique health benefits.

Soluble fiber

A gummy type of fiber that dissolves in water. It helps lower blood cholesterol levels by binding to some of the dietary cholesterol in the digestive tract and eliminating it as waste. Soluble fiber also slows the time it takes for food to empty the stomach. This, in turn, slows down glucose absorption, which may help people with diabetes control their blood glucose levels. **Good sources of soluble fiber** include apples, blueberries, pears, oranges, grapefruits, figs, carrots, beets, okra, legumes (dry beans and peas), oats, and barley.

Insoluble fiber

Gives structure to plant cell walls. It changes very little as it passes through the body. Insoluble fiber acts like a sponge, absorbing many times its weight in water. This adds bulk to the stool, causing it to move faster through the intestines. As a result, insoluble fiber promotes regularity and helps prevent constipation. By speeding the movement of wastes through the colon and out of the body, it also allows less time for potentially harmful substances to come in contact with the intestine. This is one possible reason why high-fiber diets help reduce the risk of colon cancer. **Valuable sources of insoluble fiber** include wheat bran, whole-wheat breads and cereals, berries, prunes, pears, brussels sprouts, broccoli, carrots, spinach, potatoes, nuts, seeds, and beans. (Note that oat bran contains soluble fiber.)

Fiber and Your Health

Over the past 25 years, medical scientists have observed a relationship between diets high in fiber and a reduced incidence of some chronic diseases, such as heart disease, diabetes, digestive disorders, and certain cancers, like colon and rectal cancers. However, researchers can't say for sure that fiber alone is responsible for reduced health risks, since fiber-rich foods are generally lower in fat and also contribute antioxidant vitamins and other substances that may offer protection from some diseases.

Besides its health benefits, eating foods high in fiber may help you manage your weight. How? The bulk from fiber helps you feel full and satisfied at meal times, which means you're likely to eat less. Some types of fiber delay stomach emptying, so you feel full longer. Fibrous foods also take longer to chew, slowing the rate at which you eat. In general, foods high in fiber are also low in fat and sugar, yet good sources of vitamins and minerals. A high-fiber, low-fat diet, and exercise, can help you control your weight.

The Right Amount of Fiber

Research has shown that the typical American diet needs a "fiber boost." On average, most Americans consume about 11 grams of fiber a day—only about half the amount your body needs. To increase health benefits, many health experts recommend 20-38 grams of fiber daily.

The chart on the reverse lists the approximate fiber content of various foods. Keep in mind that many foods provide both soluble and insoluble fiber. So, to optimize the health benefits, eat a variety of fiber-rich fruits, vegetables, legumes, and whole-grain products daily to meet your fiber needs.

Fiber Contents of Food

Food	Fiber (g)	Food	Fiber (g)
Whole-bran cereal, 1/2 cup	13	Instant oatmeal, 1 packet	3
Raisin-bran cereal, 1 cup	8	Bran muffin, 1 medium	3
Baked beans, 1/2 cup	7	Corn, 1 small ear	2
Canned kidney beans, 1/2 cup	5	Banana, 1 medium	2
Reduced-calorie bread, 2 slices	5	Cooked brown rice, 1/2 cup	2
Fresh strawberries, 1 cup sliced	4	Grapefruit, 1/2 medium	2
Pear, 1 medium	4	Applesauce, 1/2 cup	2
Canned peas, 1/2 cup	3	Whole wheat bread, 1 slice	2
Baked potato with skin, 1 small	3	Chopped raw cabbage, 1/2 cup	1
Chopped broccoli, 1/2 cup	3	Nuts and seeds, 1/2 ounce	1
Apple, with peel, 1 small	3	Celery, 1 stalk	1

Tips for Adding Fiber to Your Diet

If you're not used to eating high-fiber foods, gradually include them in your diet. Eating too much fiber too fast can cause gas, cramps, and loose stools.

- As you increase fiber in your diet, drink more fluids to prevent constipation and keep wastes moving through your system.
- Choose bran and other high-fiber cereals, and whole wheat breads. When meal planning, use a variety of whole grains, such as barley, brown rice, buckwheat, bulgur, whole wheat pasta, cornmeal, and wheat germ.
- Choose fruits and vegetables with edible skins and seeds. Have whole fruits and vegetables more often than juice, since the former provides more fiber.
- Watch your calories. Fiber itself doesn't provide calories, but foods that contain fiber do. Substitute high-fiber foods for other foods, rather than adding them to your daily diet.