

[IMAGE]

Know Your Fiber Facts

By Dr. Donald L. Hayes

We all know we need fiber, so why do so many of us not get enough? Maybe it's because the Standard American Diet (S.A.D.) features an ever-increasing variety of processed, fiber-stripped foods, and maybe it's because not enough people know where to get fiber or why it's part of a healthy diet. Well, that all changes today once you learn the facts about fiber.

Dietary fiber, often referred to as "roughage," is the edible portion of plant cell walls that is resistant to digestion, but is an extremely beneficial component of our diets. Fibers such as vegetables, fruits, nuts, and whole grains also have high amounts of vitamins and minerals necessary for healthy body function. And of course, a huge side benefit of eating foods rich in fiber is that they taste good!

Not only does fiber help ward off many diseases, but it's also been shown to aid in weight loss by reducing food intake at meals. This is because fiber-rich foods take longer to digest and thus result in an increased feeling of fullness and satiety. In addition, the more gradual absorption slows the entrance of sugar into the bloodstream, thereby preventing large blood glucose and insulin spikes that can lead to binge eating.

Soluble vs. Insoluble

There are two types of fiber: soluble and insoluble. Both soluble and insoluble fibers are undigested, meaning they are not absorbed into the bloodstream. Instead of being used for energy, fiber is excreted from our bodies. Although neither type is absorbed by the body, they do have different properties when mixed with water, hence the designation between the two.

Soluble fiber is "soluble" in water; when mixed with water, it forms a gel-like substance and swells. Soluble fiber has many benefits, including moderating blood glucose levels and lowering cholesterol. Pectin and gums are among the better known soluble fibers. Advantages of consuming soluble fiber include the production of salubrious compounds (antioxidants, anti-aging and anti-carcinogenic compounds) during the fermentation process.

Insoluble fiber does not absorb or dissolve in water; it passes through our digestive system in close to its original form. Insoluble fiber offers many benefits to intestinal health, including a reduction in the risk and occurrence of colorectal cancer, hemorrhoids, and constipation. Cellulose and lignins are two insoluble fibers. Among the advantages of eating insoluble fiber is its ability to increase bulk and therefore soften stools and shorten transit time through the GI tract.

Due to the overlap in function between the two types of fiber and the difficulty in measuring each type, the National Academy of Sciences is recommending that the terms *soluble* and *Insoluble* gradually be eliminated and replaced by specific beneficial effects of each fiber. Thus, you may hear less about soluble vs. insoluble fiber in the future.

Foods Rich In Fiber

fiber - Copyright © Stock Photo / Register Mark Plant foods contain both types of fiber in varying degrees, according to the plant's characteristics. Examples of foods rich in soluble fiber are fruits, vegetables, brown rice, barley, and nuts. Most of insoluble fibers come from the bran layers of cereal grains. Examples of foods rich in insoluble fiber are wheat bran and whole-grain breads and cereals. Remember, both are important for good health, so your diet should include a balance of foods rich in both types.

How Much Fiber Do We Need?

There is no recommended daily allowance (RDA) for fiber, but the American Dietetic Association recommends eating 20-35 grams of dietary fiber per day or 10-13 grams for every 1,000 calories in the diet. The average American significantly falls short of the recommended amount of fiber, consuming on average only 5-10 grams per day.

When making a food choice decision, don't worry about choosing a specific type of fiber; eating enough fiber is more important! Since dietary fiber is found only in plant products (fruits, vegetables, nuts, whole grains and legumes), these are essential to a healthy diet. If you eat at least 6-9 servings of fruits and vegetables and six servings of grain products per day (at least three of which are whole grains), you are very likely meeting your fiber requirements.

Ways to Increase Fiber Intake

- Choose whole fruits and vegetables (with peels when possible) instead of juices.
- Replace white flour with whole-wheat flour in all baked goods.
- Select whole-grain bread, pasta and cereals in place of similar processed versions.
- Choose brown rice over white rice.
- Replace meat with alternate protein sources such as beans, lentils or other legumes.

Take-Home Points

favorite fiber - Copyright â Stock Photo / Register Mark The recommendations for daily fiber intake call for about 25 grams for women and 35 grams for men, but research shows many people are getting only about 10 grams. Since the health benefits of different types of fiber vary, the best advice is to eat a variety of plant-based foods, including fruits, vegetables, legumes, and whole grains. Worry less about targeting specific types of fiber and focus more on getting your daily requirement from as many different foods as possible. Talk to your doctor for additional information.

Find Your Favorite Fiber

Need to add more fiber to your diet? Here's a list of popular fibrous foods along with their contribution to that 25-35 gram daily recommendation for fiber intake, courtesy of the Mayo Clinic:

Food: Fruits	Total Fiber (Grams)
Apple (1 medium, skin on)	4.4 grams
Orange (1 medium)	3.1 grams
Strawberries (1 1/4 cups, halves)	3.8 grams
Raspberries (1 cup)	8.0 grams
Food: Vegetables	
Peas (cooked, 1 cup)	8.8 grams
Broccoli (boiled/steamed, 1 cup)	5.1 grams
Potato (1 medium, baked, skin on)	2.9 grams
Carrots (1 medium, raw)	1.7 grams
Tomato (paste, 1/4 cup)	1.7 grams
Food: Grains, Cereals and Pasta	
Brown rice (1 cup, cooked)	3.5 grams
Spaghetti (whole wheat, cooked, 1 cup)	6.2 grams
Bread (whole wheat or multigrain, 1 slice)	1.9 grams
Popcorn (air popped, 3 cups)	3.5 grams
Food: Legumes, Nuts and Seeds	
Black beans (1 cup, cooked)	15.0 grams
Baked beans (vegetarian, canned and cooked, 1 cup)	10.4 grams
Lima beans (1 cup, cooked)	13.2 grams
Almonds (1 ounce)	3.5 grams

Note: Fiber content may vary per brand for some of the above; always read the nutrition label on the package for precise fiber content per serving.

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