

[IMAGE]

## **Make Fiber a Friend, Not a Foe**

By Julie T. Chen, MD

Even though most of us know that fiber should be an important part of our daily diet, why is it that so many of us shun the idea of too much fiber? Sure the initiation of fiber can be tricky because too much all at once causes bloating and gas, but its overall health benefits far surpass the trickiness of it being incorporated into our diet, doesn't it?

The answer to that question should be a resounding yes...and here's why.

Imagine fiber like the maid you like to hire to clean out your house or apartment regularly. If you could have the maid there to keep all the dirt and debris away, you would right? Fiber helps to keep our digestive tract "clean" per se. It helps to keep our intestinal flora more balanced. It also helps to slow down digestion and keeps us regular in our bowel movements. It is overall like the best maid you could ever have for your digestive tract. So, why wouldn't you want that on a daily basis?

In regards to the concern about bloating and gas, here's how you can avoid it: introduce fiber in a slow and steady manner such that you are increasing your fiber slowly every few days or week. This way, your intestinal tract isn't shocked with a large amount of fiber one day, then minimal exposure on another day, then another large bolus of fiber again a few days later. Our intestinal tract likes regularity, so you should provide a similar level of fiber into your diet on a daily basis and as you slowly increase the dosage to 25-35 grams per day, you will allow your intestinal tract time to get used to it. By slowly titrating up your dosage of fiber intake, your gut will be much happier with you and you will be much happier with your gut as well.

Now that we've addressed the disconcerting issue of gas and bloating, we can turn our attention once more towards the positives of fiber intake. We have seen in medicine time and time again the health benefits of fiber. It is seen in multiple studies to be beneficial for weight loss, high cholesterol, high blood pressure, diabetes sugar control, cancer, and healthy colon functioning. So, while we are all aware that fiber is a good thing to have in our diet, the bigger question now comes down to where can we get the fiber in our diet?

The types of fiber that were seen to be most beneficial for cholesterol and diabetic issues are mostly from, but are not limited to, foods that fall under the vegetable, fruit, and nut categories. So, since I usually highly

recommend a mostly plant-based diet to my patients for its anti-inflammatory health effects, those people who eat in this way, usually are getting enough fiber in their diet.

A simple way to incorporate fiber in your diet is to make sure that you eat vegetables at every meal and that there is a variety of vegetables throughout each day and every week. Many people like to stick to the same vegetables every day but by doing this, you miss out on a gamut of other vitamins and nutrients that you would otherwise get if you have a habit of eating the colors of the rainbow.

Another way to ensure that you are getting all the fiber and nutrients you need in a day is to incorporate whole grains into your diet. If you are someone who likes carbohydrates but you know you cannot have too much of it for weight or blood sugar issues, at least make sure that what you do consume of it in any given day is in the form of whole grains and not processed carbohydrates. This way, you know that you are doing less damage with your carbohydrate intake for the day if you get your fix from whole grains instead of the processed simple carbohydrates found in junk foods and less health-beneficial foods.

Now that we've gone over some health benefits of fiber and how to avoid the bloating and gas, here are the top three tips you can take away from this topic:

1. Increase fiber intake slowly and regularly so that you can avoid the nasty intestinal side effects of irregular fiber intake.
2. Eating a mostly plant-based diet will help to take the guess work out of getting enough fiber into your daily diet.
3. Knowing that you need fiber in your diet is not a blanket approval for you to eat large quantities of carbohydrates daily. You should focus on vegetables mostly and incorporate a lower quantity of whole grains and fruits into your daily diet. Processed carbohydrates usually do not have enough fiber to warrant you eating it regularly.

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