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Eat More Fiber? Why?

It seems that everywhere you turn, high fiber cereals, breads and nutrition bars are being advertised. But what is fiber, anyway? Where does it come from? What makes it a healthy choice for the heart?



to a feeling of satiety and help prevent overeating. Keep in mind that natural high fiber foods – particularly raw fruits and vegetables – tend to be less “energy dense” than many other foods, which means they have fewer calories for the same volume of food.

WHAT IS FIBER?

Dietary fiber is a term that encompasses several different kinds of substances. There are two types of fiber, each of which has its own benefits.

- Soluble fiber dissolves in water to form a gel-like material. It is made from carbohydrates and is found in fruits, oats, barley, and legumes (beans and peas). Most cardiovascular benefits of fiber are from the soluble variety.

- Insoluble fiber, or “roughage,” does not dissolve in water. It is found in wheat, rye, and other grains which pass through the digestive tract without being broken down into nutrients. Its benefits are thought to be mostly digestive, though it has been associated with decreased cardiovascular risk.

SOURCES OF FIBER

Fiber is naturally found in whole grains such as bran, nuts and seeds, beans and peas (legumes), fruits, and vegetables. But if it's fiber you seek, it's important to eat these foods unprocessed or raw -- modern food processing and packaging typically removes the skin from vegetables or the outer coat (also known as “bran”) from grains, essentially removing most of the fiber from the food. That means canned fruits and vegetables and pulp-free fruit juice is mostly sugar, with minimal fiber. Also, in general, foods made from white flour have very little fiber. This includes the average white bread, pasta, pizza crust, and most packaged snacks.

From a cardiac standpoint, whole foods are generally a better source of fiber than supplements (Metamucil, Citrucel, etc), which lack the beneficial vitamins, nutrients, and minerals found in foods containing fiber.

CARDIOVASCULAR BENEFITS

Many studies demonstrate that high soluble fiber intake is associated with a 40-50 percent reduction in heart disease and stroke. Though the mechanisms of this benefit are not completely understood, some benefits are clear.

BLOOD SUGAR

Soluble fiber can help control blood sugar levels. In fact, one study showed a 30 percent reduced risk of developing diabetes in people with a high fiber intake. In people who have diabetes, soluble fiber can help slow the uptake of glucose into the digestive system, thereby helping to control glucose levels. There is increasing evidence that rapid swings in blood sugar has negative effects on our arteries at a cellular level, and may promote inflammation and the development of coronary artery disease.

CHOLESTEROL

Certain soluble fibers such as beans, oats, flaxseed, and psyllium can reduce LDL, the “bad cholesterol,” even in patients who are already taking cholesterol medications. Fiber has also been demonstrated to help reduce blood pressure, especially in people over 40 and those with a history of hypertension.

WEIGHT LOSS

High fiber foods generally require more chewing time, which slows down the eating process and helps you to register that you are no longer hungry. Also, insoluble fiber can make a meal seem larger, which can contribute

LONGEVITY

Most recently, a study of almost 400,000 people found that subjects who ate a diet rich in whole grains, fruits, and vegetables were 22 percent less likely to die after nine years than those who ate the least fiber. Specifically, the high fiber group had fewer deaths from cardiovascular disease, infectious disease, respiratory disease, and some cancers – particularly in men. These benefits were thought to relate to anti-inflammatory properties of fiber and the beneficial vitamins, minerals, and other chemicals that may be found in whole grains, fruits, and vegetables.

HOW MUCH FIBER? WHAT ABOUT THE CALORIES?

Generally, a reasonable goal is 20-35 grams of total fiber per day, with 10-15 grams from soluble fiber. Unfortunately, most Americans consume less than half of this amount, with the average American daily intake being 12-18 grams of total fiber. Dietary fiber content of fruit and vegetables are easily found online, and standard nutrition labels will list the amount of dietary fiber in a packaged product. Generally speaking, the body extracts approximately 2 calories per gram of soluble fiber, and no calories for the undigested insoluble variety. Sounds like a good deal, if you stick to unprocessed vegetables and grains! But for packaged foods, be sure to read food labels carefully -- many high-fiber cereals or snacks have added sugar and can pack many more calories than you bargain for, which can negate many of fiber's health benefits!

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