Manage Your Weight by Adding Fiber

Losing weight and getting fit are among the most popular New Year’s resolutions made by Americans every year. If your goal this year is to improve your health and manage your weight, fiber may be the missing key to your success.

Whole grains, vegetables, fruits and legumes (e.g. beans, peas and lentils) are very good sources of dietary fiber. Usually these foods also are low in calories, fat and added sugars, making them ideal choices in a weight-loss program.

The Benefits of Adding Fiber to Your Diet

Fiber Helps You Feel Full Longer: Many fiber-rich foods take longer to chew, which may help you to eat slower and consume less overall. Since fiber slows the digestion of food, you feel full for longer periods of time on fewer calories.

Fiber Provides Your Body With Energy: Fiber is a food component that is not absorbed by the body, so it does not contribute calories to food. However, fiber-rich foods improve and sustain your energy levels so that you can increase your physical activity, whether walking the dog or doing resistance training at the gym.

Fiber is Good for Your Heart: Fiber can help lower cholesterol levels. It binds to and removes fatty substances from the body without allowing them to be absorbed. Foods high in soluble fiber help to lower LDL (“bad”) cholesterol without lowering HDL (“good”) cholesterol. Fiber also may reduce the amount of cholesterol the liver produces.

Fiber is Good for Your Digestive System: Insoluble fiber helps the colon function properly by absorbing water and moving waste through the intestinal tract. It adds bulk and softness to the stool, promotes regularity, relieves constipation and reduces formation of hemorrhoids and diverticulosis.

Fiber Helps Reduce Your Risk of Type 2 Diabetes: Fiber helps to lower or stabilize blood sugar levels by slowing the rate at which carbohydrates break down and glucose is released into the bloodstream. This reduces your risk of developing type 2 diabetes, or it plays a role in treatment if you have already developed diabetes.

Fiber Helps Protect From Certain Cancers: A fiber-rich diet may lower your risk for certain types of cancers, such as colon, breast, ovarian and prostate cancer.

Sources of Fiber

The only sources of dietary fiber are plants (e.g. whole grains, vegetables, fruits and legumes). Meat and dairy products do not contain fiber, and you should not depend on fiber pills and powders.

Here are some examples of plant foods that contain the two types of fiber, soluble and insoluble. You need to consume both types of fiber, because they have distinct qualities that keep you healthy in different ways.

Soluble Fiber (dissolves in water): dry beans and peas, lentils, whole oats, oatmeal, oat bran, ground barley, flaxseeds, psyllium seeds and many vegetables and fruits.

Insoluble Fiber (doesn’t dissolve in water): whole-wheat products, wheat bran, oat bran, corn bran, flaxseeds, fruits with skins, root vegetables and legumes.
Ways to Add Fiber to Your Diet

Most people need more fiber in their diets. The American Dietetic Association recommends that an adult’s diet contain about 25 to 38 grams of fiber per day, depending on a person’s age and gender.

To get more fiber in your diet, practice one of these suggestions for a couple of months. When it becomes a habit, add another one.

- At mealtime, fill 75% of your plate with fruits, vegetables and grain products.
- Increase your intake to 2 cups of fruit and 2½ cups of vegetables daily. This is based on a 2,000 calorie intake, so increase or decrease this amount depending on your daily caloric (energy) needs.
- Over the period of a week, eat a wide variety of deep-colored fruits and vegetables, including red, dark green, purple, orange, and yellow ones. These are rich in fiber, vitamins and antioxidants.
- Select whole fruits and vegetables over fruit and vegetable juices. The peel and pulp contain the fiber.
- Eat the edible skin and seeds of fruits and vegetables.
- Eat legumes (beans, peas and lentils) two to three times a week.
- Eat 6 or more ounce-equivalents of grains daily, with at least half of this amount being whole grain products.
- Switch to whole grain flour, breads, pastas, crackers and cereals. Select bread that lists “whole wheat” or “100% whole grain” as the first ingredient.
- Choose breakfast cereals with 3 grams or more of fiber per serving (preferably 5 grams or more) but with very little fat and added sugar. Top with fruit for more fiber.
- Eat more oatmeal. Keep instant oatmeal in your desk drawer at work to eat as an emergency snack or late breakfast. Add oatmeal to meatloaf.
- For a healthful snack, make your own trail mix from dried fruits and nuts.
- Replace white rice with brown rice.
- Replace white potatoes with sweet potatoes or quick barley. If you eat a baked potato, however, eat the skin for more fiber.
- Add wheat germ, sunflower seeds, sesame seeds or ground flaxseeds to baked goods, or sprinkle them on casseroles.

Increase your fiber intake slowly, since some people may experience temporary discomfort (e.g. intestinal bloating, gas and diarrhea) until the body adjusts. Aim for just one extra serving a day, then work up gradually. Chew foods slowly to break down the fiber. Drink 8 or more cups of liquids daily, including water, milk and 100% fruit and vegetable juices.

Refer to HGIC 4052, Fiber for more tips on fiber, as well as some fiber-rich recipes.

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