Benefits of eating fiber [1]

Alice,

What are the benefits of eating fiber? How can too much fiber in one’s diet be dangerous?

Answer

Dear Reader,

As they say, everything in moderation — including fiber! Eating enough fiber can have many health benefits, while too much may have some uncomfortable consequences. By learning how much fiber is needed, how much is in food, and making dietary adjustments, a balance can be found that’s beneficial for the body and the bowels.

Fiber is basically composed of plant-based food matter (i.e., fruits, veggies, whole grains, nuts, and beans) that can’t be broken down by the digestive system. Whole foods contain both soluble (dissolves in water) and insoluble (doesn’t dissolve in water) fiber. Although the recommendations don’t distinguish between these two types of fiber, they’re different and have distinct functions — soluble fiber helps to reduce cholesterol and glucose levels, and insoluble fiber helps with constipation by increasing fecal bulk.

Overall, fiber may lead to many health benefits, such as:

- **Keeping the digestive system regular**: Fiber decreases the risk of constipation by bulking up and softening stool.
- **Maintaining bowel health**: Fiber may prevent the development of diverticulitis and hemorrhoids. It has also been shown to reduce the symptoms of irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) in some cases.
- **Lowering cholesterol and blood glucose levels**: By reducing "bad" (low-density lipoprotein or LDL) cholesterol and blood glucose levels, soluble fiber also leads to a decreased risk for cardiovascular disease, coronary heart disease, and type II diabetes.
- **Controlling appetite/weight**: Foods that contain fiber are typically low in fat, energy-dense, take more time to chew, can help maintain satiety, and block some of the digestion of fats and proteins.
- **Preventing cancer**: Fiber consumption may lower the risk for colorectal cancer, but the
evidence isn't yet conclusive.

List adapted from Mayo Clinic [2].

Curious if you’re getting enough fiber in your diet? You can use the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Food List [3] to figure out the fiber content of the foods you eat and get suggestions for high-fiber foods. Reading the nutrition facts on food labels can also help you identify how much fiber you’re consuming. The amount of fiber that you need can vary based on various factors, such as age or sex assigned at birth.

However, consuming too much fiber can cause unwelcome problems. Some insoluble fibers limit the ability to absorb certain minerals, including calcium, magnesium, phosphorous, and iron. High-fiber diets can also affect absorption of some medications. Excess fiber can also cause abdominal pain, gas, and cramping.

So, where to begin? If you’re concerned you aren’t getting enough, consider adding fiber to your diet gradually, so that your gastrointestinal tract has time to adapt. You may also want to drink lots of fluids to keep the fiber soft and prevent constipation. Choosing a variety of soluble and insoluble fiber-rich food sources, such as fruits, vegetables, whole grain breads and cereals, and legumes (beans and peas) can help to ensure that not only will you get a good mix of fiber, but beneficial nutrients, too.

It’s always a good idea to touch base with a health care provider before making any major dietary changes. If you need advice or more information about incorporating fiber-rich foods into a balanced diet, you might consider making an appointment with a registered dietitian as well.

Movin' right along,

Alice!

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