

## Challenges and Choices: Fit for Life

# Eat more fiber

Amy C. Sigman, former Extension Associate, Family Nutrition Education Programs, Department of Food Science and Human Nutrition, University of Missouri Extension



**W**hat gives fruits and vegetables their crunch? What makes grains, beans and legumes chewy? The answer to both questions is fiber. Fiber is the part of plant foods that our bodies cannot digest. You may wonder then, why do we need it?

We have known for a long time that fiber aids in moving waste out of the body regularly. New research says fiber may also help prevent obesity and diseases such as diabetes, heart disease, stroke, diverticular disease and some cancers.

There are two kinds of fiber that help fight these diseases, insoluble and soluble. Insoluble fiber holds onto water in the intestinal tract. This increases bulk, softens the stool and aids in passing waste out of the body. Soluble fiber can help lower blood cholesterol and control blood sugar levels.

Eating a combination of both insoluble and soluble fiber is best. Insoluble fiber is found in foods such as whole grains, wheat bran and some vegetables. Soluble fiber is found in foods such as beans, oats, barley and some fruits and vegetables.

### How much is enough?

The National Cancer Institute recommends 25 grams to 35 grams of fiber per day. Most Americans get much less.

*A word of caution:* Talk with your doctor before making any major change in your diet. Slowly add fiber to your diet, but don't eat more than 50 grams a day. Too much fiber can cause gas, diarrhea and discomfort. It may also prevent some minerals from being used by the body.

Read on for tips on how to get more fiber into your meals and snacks.

### Breakfast

- Start your day with whole grain bread, cereal or muffins.
- Top your cereal with fruit, dates or raisins.
- Eat a piece of fresh fruit.
- Try stewed or dried fruit.

### Lunch or dinner

- Fix a sandwich on whole-grain bread.
- Add vegetables to your sandwich. Try lettuce, sprouts, cucumbers and mushrooms.
- Add peas or corn to your green salad.
- Have a baked potato -- and eat the peel, too.
- Mix carrots, pineapple and raisins for a high-fiber salad.
- Sprinkle your salad with seeds. Try sunflower, sesame or pumpkin.
- Warm up with hearty bean soup.
- Make your pasta dishes more interesting with vegetables. Try broccoli, carrots and tomatoes.
- Add barley or brown rice to your vegetable soup.
- Add whole-grain breads and rice to your meal.
- Sprinkle whole-grain cereals on salads, baked potatoes and casseroles -- anywhere you want crunch.

### Snacks

- Munch on low-fat popcorn.
- Spread peanut butter on a celery stick.
- Toast whole grain bread.
- Make your own high-fiber dip with mashed beans and tomato salsa.
- Use fresh vegetables, whole grain crackers, or baked tortilla chips as dippers.
- Eat a banana, peach, pear or apple.

### Recipe Adjustments

You can add high-fiber ingredients to your favorite recipes, and you will hardly know the difference. These ideas are only guidelines. Try them, and see what works best for you.

- Use whole-wheat flour to replace one-fourth to one-half of the all-purpose flour called for in a recipe.

#### Example

A recipe calls for 2 cups of all-purpose flour.

*Adjustment:* Use ½ cup whole-wheat flour and 1-1/2 cups all-purpose flour. Or use 1 cup whole-wheat flour and 1 cup all-purpose flour.

- Grind oat bran or oatmeal as fine as flour in a food processor or blender. Use to replace up to one-fourth of the all-purpose flour called for in a recipe.

#### Example

A recipe calls for 4 cups of all-purpose flour.

*Adjustment:* Use 1 cup oat flour (made from ground oat bran or oatmeal) and 3 cups all-purpose flour.

- Grind bran cereal in a food processor or blender. Use to replace up to one-fourth of the all-purpose flour called for in a recipe.

#### Example

A recipe calls for 1 cup of all-purpose flour.

*Adjustment:* Use 1/4 cup bran cereal flour and 3/4 cup all-purpose flour.

## Questions and Answers

### Does processing food change how much fiber is in food?

Yes. Unprocessed plant foods are the best source of fiber. A fresh apple has 3.0 grams of fiber. Apple juice has no fiber.

More examples are shown in the “Compare the Difference” chart below.

### What is meant by whole grain?

Whole grain means the grain has not been processed as much. This is important because processing often removes the outer layer of the grain (called the bran) that contains fiber. For example, whole wheat flour contains fiber from the bran, while white flour contains very little fiber.

### Meat can be tough and chewy. Does it have fiber in it?

No. Fiber is found only in plant foods including fruits, vegetables, grains, beans, legumes, nuts and seeds.

### I have heard fiber helps people lose weight -- is this true?

Fiber itself does not cause us to lose weight. However, because eating foods with fiber makes us feel more full, we eat less.

### I want to choose high-fiber breads and cereals. What should I look for on food labels?

For breads, look for whole grains. For example, whole-wheat flour, not just wheat flour. Look at the Nutrition Facts panel for grams of dietary fiber per serving. Choose cooked and ready-to-eat cereals with at least 2 grams of fiber per serving. The less fat and sugar, the better.

Eating fiber can be simple. To start, try a few ideas that sound good to you, and work up to the recommended amount. You’ll be doing yourself a favor.

Compare the Difference	
Less processed foods	More processed foods
Whole-wheat bread, 1 slice 2 grams fiber	White bread, 1 slice 0.6 grams fiber
Brown rice, 1/2 cup, cooked 2.4 grams fiber	White rice, 1/2 cup, cooked 1 gram fiber
Fresh orange, 1 medium 2 grams fiber	Orange juice, 1/2 cup 0 grams fiber
How much fiber are you eating every day?	
Food	Grams of fiber
All dairy products	0
All meat, fish, and poultry	0
Fruit	
Apple, 1 medium, with peel	3.0
Banana, 1 medium	2.5
Peach, 1 medium, with skin	2.0
Pear, 1 medium, with skin	4.5
Strawberries, 1 cup	3.5
Vegetables	
Broccoli, 1/2 cup, cooked	2.0
Carrot, 1 medium	2.3
Spinach, 1/2 cup, cooked	2.0
Corn, 1/2 cup, canned	3.0
Peas, frozen, 1/2 cup	3.0
Potato, baked, with skin, 1 medium	3.6
Sweet potato, baked, with skin, 1 medium	3.4
Grains	
Bran flakes, 3/4 cup	5.3
Oatmeal, cooked, 3/4 cup	1.6
Beans and legumes	
Kidney Beans, 1/2 cup, cooked	7.3
Red Beans, 1/2 cup, cooked	6.0
Lentils, 1/2 cup, cooked	3.7
Peanuts, 1/4 cup, roasted	3.0
All fiber values listed are approximate.	

*This program is funded in part by USDA's Food Stamp Program*