

Fibre and Bowel Health

Dietary fibre is necessary for good digestion and a healthy bowel. It also helps control weight, blood cholesterol level and blood sugar level and may protect against bowel cancer. Good sources of dietary fibre include wholegrain breads and cereals, fruits, vegetables, legumes, nuts and seeds.

What is fibre?

Dietary fibre is a general term meaning the parts of foods from plants that are not digested or absorbed in the stomach or small intestine. Most dietary fibres are carbohydrates. Dietary fibre passes unchanged into the large intestine (colon), where bacteria at least partly break it down by fermentation. This fermentation may produce a lot of gas (wind) in the bowel.

There are several different types of dietary fibre including soluble fibre, insoluble fibre and resistant starch.

- Good sources of soluble fibre include oats, barley, rye, fruits, vegetables and legumes (e.g. beans, lentils).
- Good sources of insoluble fibre include wheat bran, rice bran, wholegrain



foods, the skins of fruits and vegetables, nuts and seeds.

- Foods containing resistant starch include unprocessed wholegrain cereals, seeds and nuts, under-ripe bananas, legumes, slightly undercooked (“al dente”) pasta and cooked and cooled potato, rice and pasta. Resistant starch (as *Hi-Maize*) is added to some breakfast cereals and fibre supplement products.

Dietary fibre is also called ‘roughage’ or ‘bulk’.

Fibre and health

Fibre is important for a healthy digestive system. Benefits of dietary fibre include:

- Fibre increases the bulk of faeces (bowel motions) and absorbs water to enlarge and soften faeces. Large, soft faeces pass quickly and easily through the bowel, reducing the likelihood of constipation
- High fibre foods can help with weight control. They are often slower to eat (they need more chewing), they are filling and they tend to contain fewer kilojoules (calories) per gram than low fibre foods
- Fibre, especially soluble fibre, slows sugar absorption. A high fibre diet can help people with diabetes control their blood sugar levels and may also reduce the risk of developing type 2 diabetes
- Soluble fibre can help to lower blood cholesterol level
- Fibre may reduce the risk of bowel cancer. Fermentation of soluble fibre and resistant starch produces short-chain fatty acids, which may protect the bowel from cancer. Also, quick passage of faeces through the bowel reduces the time that cancer-causing substances are in the bowel
- High fibre foods usually contain many vitamins, minerals and essential nutrients.

Effects of low fibre

A diet that is low in fibre may contribute to a variety of health problems including:

- Constipation
- Haemorrhoids (piles)
- Bowel cancer
- Diverticular disease
- Irritable bowel syndrome
- Being overweight
- High blood cholesterol
- Diabetes.

Self care

- Eat a wide variety of high fibre foods. Adults should aim to eat 5 serves of vegetables, 2 serves of fruit and some wholegrain and cereal foods every day. Limit foods high in fat, sugar or salt.
- Increase fibre in diet gradually, to avoid gas, bloating and cramping.
- Eat regular meals to stimulate bowel movement.
- Never ignore the urge to open your bowels.
- Drink enough water every day to satisfy your thirst and to keep your urine 'light-coloured' (unless a doctor advises not to). A person on a high fibre diet needs to drink plenty of fluid.
- Exercise at a moderate level for at least 30 minutes on all or most days of the week.

Fibre supplements

The best sources of fibre are high fibre foods. Dietary fibre can be supplemented with fibre supplement products if needed. A pharmacist can advise on fibre supplements.

Common ingredients of fibre supplement products include psyllium (e.g. *Metamucil*, *Nucolox*), inulin (e.g. *Metamucil Fibresure*), guar gum

(e.g. *Benefiber*), ispaghula (e.g. *Fybogel*) and sterculia (e.g. *Normacol Plus*, *Normafibe*). They may produce less gas in the bowel than high fibre foods.

When using fibre supplements always read and follow the instructions carefully. Fibre supplements:

- must be taken with plenty of fluid
- may reduce absorption of medicines and are best taken 2 hours apart from other medicines.

Some high fibre foods

Breads, cakes, biscuits

- Wholemeal, wholegrain, multigrain, white with added fibre, soy and linseed breads.
- Cakes, biscuits, scones and muffins made with wholemeal flour (some may be high in fat).
- Wholegrain and wholemeal crackers (e.g. *Ryvita*, *Vita Wheat*).

Breakfast cereals

- Rolled oats, wholemeal porridge.
- Bran cereals (e.g. *All Bran*, *Sultana Bran*).
- Unprocessed wheat bran, oat bran, rice bran.
- Whole wheat breakfast cereals (e.g. *Weetbix*, *Weeties*, *Vita Brits*).
- Muesli (toasted muesli is often high in fat – check the label).

Grains and grain foods

- Oats, rye, barley, buckwheat, cracked wheat.
- Brown rice, polenta, couscous.
- Pasta – spinach or wholemeal.

Vegetables

- Legumes such as chick peas, lentils, beans (e.g. baked, broad, butter, kidney, lima, soy beans).
- Potatoes, carrots, beetroot, parsnips, sweet potatoes, turnips, yams.
- Broccoli, brussel sprouts, cabbage, cauliflower, mushrooms, leeks, peas, snow peas, spinach, asparagus, Asian greens.

Note: Salad vegetables such as celery, lettuce and cucumber are not good sources of fibre.

Nuts and seeds

- All kinds (some nuts are also high in fat).

Fruit

- All fresh and dried fruit, especially with skin, seeds, pith.
- Apples, apricots, bananas, berries, figs, guava, kiwi fruit, mandarin, mango, oranges, pears, plums, quince and rhubarb are particularly high in fibre.

Note: Fruit juices provide much less fibre than eating the whole fruit.

For more information

Dietitians Association

Listed under 'D' in the white pages of the phone book

Website: www.daa.asn.au

The Gut Foundation

Phone: (02) 9382 2749

Website: www.gutfoundation.com

Healthdirect Australia

Phone: 1800 022 222

Website: www.healthinsite.gov.au

Consumer Medicine Information (CMI)

Your pharmacist can advise on CMI leaflets.

National Prescribing Service (NPS) Medicines Information

Phone: 1300 MEDICINE (1300 633 424)

Website: www.nps.org.au

The Poisons Information Centre

In case of poisoning phone 13 11 26 from anywhere in Australia.

*Pharmacists are medicines experts.
Ask a pharmacist for advice when choosing a medicine.*

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